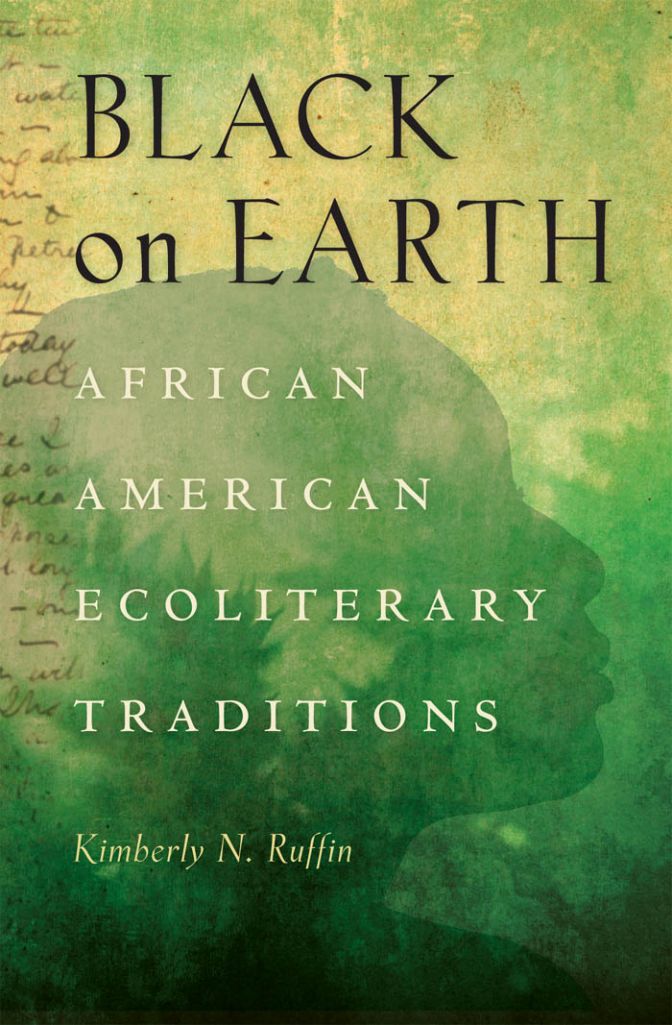
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TRADITIONS
Kimberly N. Ruffin

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AFRICAN
AMERICAN
ECOLITERARY
TRADITIONS

Black on Earth

Kimberly N. Ruffin

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Dedicated to
Mrs. Maybell Ruffin
and
Elizabeth and Marvin M. Ruffin Sr.

Everlasting Love

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Black on Earth

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INTRODUCTION

Message of the Trees

Recognizing Ecological Burden and Beauty

> Cutting down that beautiful tree won't solve the problem at hand. It still happened.
>
> Caseptla Bailey, mother of one of the Jena Six (2007)

> We don't have a sense of belonging to the environmentalist identity. . . . [This is] a serious identity crisis for the movement as far as I'm concerned. . . . We have to reclaim our right to the environmentalist issue.
>
> Majora Carter, founder, Sustainable South Bronx (2006)

The White Tree

For as long as Africans have been Americans, they have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature. Even in the twenty-first century, standing next to a tree has been difficult. A student tradition in Jena, Louisiana, brought this fact to national attention in August 2006. A black freshman at the area high school asked permission from the school's principal to sit under a tree commonly understood as "the white tree." The following day when black students arrived to enjoy the white tree, they found three nooses hanging from it. The school's principal suggested an expulsion of the white students responsible; however, they received only a three-day suspension. Frustrated by this and other incidents of racial injustice, six black teenagers beat a white classmate whom they accused of making racist comments related to the noose hanging. Although the white student sustained relatively minor injuries,[1] five of the Jena Six were charged with attempted murder. Across the United States, people saw the treatment of the Jena Six as representative of a national scourge: a criminal justice system that routinely minimizes or dismisses crimes perpetrated by whites

and either falsely accuses blacks or inflates and unduly punishes black wrongdoing. A national outcry against the racial injustices brought into relief by the Jena Six culminated in a protest march that drew thousands to Jena on September 20, 2007, with solidarity protests around the country.

School officials felled the white tree. Although it was reported that the tree would have been destroyed in light of new construction plans, LaSalle Parish School Board member Billy Fowler also remarked, "School's about to start. We don't want the blacks coming back up there looking at the tree knowing what happened, or the whites. We just want to start fresh" (A. Brown, "Jena High"). Caseptla Bailey's comment that "cutting down that beautiful tree" would not solve the "problem at hand" supports a different vision of a fresh start, one capable of appreciating the tree's beauty and imagining it beyond the horrible incidents that threatened the future of six black teenagers. She is like anyone who is able to identify nonhuman natural beauty despite the ecological burden she and her community endure. In this vision, starting fresh does not mean purging the community's memory of what occurred. Bailey's comments suggest that a more holistic historical beauty can come from keeping our troubled relics, particularly the natural, living ones. Were the tree saved, it might have served as a reclaimed symbol of integration and equity in public space access. But now the tree can be of no benefit to anyone. This tree's final moments will be forever bound with the images of the racialized terrorism of lynching.

The missed opportunity to make a once "white" tree part of a new, complex historical narrative sophisticated enough to acknowledge an unjust past and to set the stage for a more just future represents the importance of defining "the problem at hand." This problem reaches back further than the white students' hanging of nooses and its aftermath: it is the coupling of racism and ecological alienation. The de facto reservation for whites of a prime environmental resource at the school is indicative of a larger national pattern that has criminalized African Americans as "environmental others" (Washington, *Packing Them In*, 22) whose very presence in natural or built environments is cause for concern.

Incidents of environmental othering exemplify one-half of what I call an ecological paradox for African Americans. I define this as an "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox," which pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook. For instance, an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and envi-

ronmentally because of their degraded status. Simultaneously, however, the experience of ecological beauty results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature[2] that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils. In this study, the ecological burden-and-beauty paradox serves as the foundation for my examination of African American ecoliterature. I provide a multifaceted treatment of this burden-and-beauty paradox by identifying examples of the rich variety of African American ecological outlooks in verbal art (oral history and written texts).

Before turning to my ecocritical reading of African American literary texts, I return to the example of the white tree in Jena, Louisiana, to illustrate further the layers of ecological burden many African Americans face. Institutional and individual acquiescence in the school's tradition in Jena left black students with a pointed sense that they were environmental others who were not fully entitled to enjoy the outdoor resources of their school. In fact, the courtyard of the school could be described as a site of what Grace Carroll calls "mundane extreme environmental stress." Carroll defines this as "an environment in which racism and subtle oppression are ubiquitous, constant, continuing, and mundane and one in which African Americans must daily suffer the annoying 'micro-aggressions' such environments breed" (4). The routine practice of white students segregating themselves and enjoying the privilege of congregating under the only available shade tree in the school's courtyard made this school tradition mundane. On a daily basis, the white students could enjoy a carte blanche outdoor experience of the school, taking in the shade and beauty of the tree if they so pleased. In oppressive heat, this premium environmental resource was reserved for them; they could locate themselves under the white tree without fear of repercussion. By contrast, on a daily basis, African American students faced restricted access to the outdoor resources of the school. Every day they had to look at a tree in their schoolyard that they could appreciate only from afar. When it came to this natural location, African American students were not welcome; they were not understood as full members of the school community; they were environmental others.

Ultimately, the microaggressive messages that supported this school tradition were in sync with the practice of criminalizing African Americans, both indoors and outdoors. The black student's request for permission to use the tree reflects his perception of the tradition's extreme and stressful impact. His actions suggest he knew African Americans were perceived

as environmental others and wanted reassurance, indeed permission, to enjoy the resources made available to his white peers. He sought authorization from a school official. Although he was granted permission to use the tree, he was not given public approval by the principal to benefit from the tree without repercussion. No adults explained to the school community that it was necessary for the segregated practice to end. If the black student was to dismantle this ecologically unjust tradition, he would have to do it alone.

Even though the student who sought permission did not receive the support he deserved, he was wise in his decision to seek authorization. His mere presence under a tree at his own school was interpreted as a violation by some white students. The mundane extreme environmental stress created by the white tree would be escalated by the white students who hung the nooses on the tree. The three nooses would leave no question about their intended message designating the tree's racial titleholders. The white students' actions advanced the daily microaggression of unequal access to the school's outdoor resources to a macroaggressive, life-threatening gesture worthy of the designation "hate crime." The ease with which microaggressions around this tree escalated into macroaggressions reflects the union of environmental alienation and racism in the United States. All the white students had to do was fashion rope into nooses and attach them to a tree to evoke centuries of brutal, racialized place- and power-keeping.

Although reports about the Jena Six case did not contextualize it as an ecological (or environmental) issue, the incident illustrates that the history of racialized slavery and its continuing aftermath are factors in African Americans' access to the natural world and their perceptions of nature. As evoked in the racialization of the schoolyard tree in Jena, a long history exists of making nonhuman nature reflect racist exploitation and violence. Long-standing environmental micro- and macroaggressions that reinforce oppression have left African Americans simultaneously separated from prime nonhuman natural resources and characterized as animalistic subhumans. Indeed, many African Americans have not had much actual or conceptual refuge when it comes to environmental concerns in the United States.

Perhaps, then, Majora Carter's description of an "identity crisis" in American environmentalism (Griscom-Little, "Majora League") is no surprise. Maybe her poor, working-class, and primarily nonwhite constitu-

ency in the South Bronx is not comfortable with forms of environmentalism that overlook the unjust beginnings of the nation in displacement, genocide, and enslavement and the subsequent racial disparities in environmental experience.

Certainly the representation of African Americans in mainstream environmental organizations suggests that environmentalism has not spoken to their conceptions of history or desires for the future. Scholars who have tried to understand the dearth of African American involvement in mainstream environmental organizations have come to different, sometimes opposing, conclusions. For instance, in *The Value of Life: Biological Diversity and Human Society*, Stephen Kellert defines his purpose as exploring the major demographic groups that influence how people "value living diversity," and ethnicity is one of his categories. He mentions that "data on ethnicity are often lacking and inconsistent" and that "the findings presented here are admittedly based on limited evidence." Nevertheless, he asserts, "It appears that a large proportion of African-Americans do not place a particularly high value on the positive experience of living diversity, nor do they strongly support its protection. . . . Until all ethnic groups believe that the chances for leading a richer and more rewarding life depend on a healthy, diverse, and abundant biota, this country may not be able to elicit the commitment necessary to halt the current mass destruction of life on earth" (61–62). Given Kellert's description, "ethnic diversity" is depicted as an impediment to environmental progress. He faults African Americans for not embracing values he sees as important to conservation issues, calling "ethnic differences" a potential "Achilles heel of the conservation movement" (60).[3] But other scholars view the relationship of ethnicity and environmentalism differently. Theodore Walker, in "African-American Resources for a More Inclusive Liberation Theology," writes, "Too often what passes for a wider concern inclusive of the environment is in fact a white racially gerrymandered concern which reaches out to include plants and animals while continuing to exclude black and colored peoples. These difficulties have yet to be overcome, and they must be overcome if white environmentalists and animal rights activists expect to receive the support of black and colored peoples" (Walker 279). Ironically, while they direct responsibility at different groups, with Kellert describing African Americans as nearly apathetic about living diversity and Walker highlighting what he sees as the racist bias of white environmentalists, both scholars identify ethnicity as an important feature in U.S. environmental

discussions. Indeed, acknowledging racial/ethnic diversity within U.S. environmental history can better prepare Americans to interact in national and transnational conversations about the environment.[4]

Other scholars examining demographic categories and environmentalism have identified that ethnicity (and other factors such as class) can be crucial in how environmental behaviors and attitudes are defined. Studying many of the same demographic categories as Kellert in her work *Race, Class, Gender, and American Environmentalism*, Dorceta Taylor comes to the following conclusion:

> The history of American environmentalism presented by most authors is generally limited to the perspective of White middle class male environmental activism. The tendency to view all environmental activism through this lens limits our understanding of how class, race, and gender relations structured environmental experiences and responses over time. . . . The environmental movement is a powerful social movement; however, it faces many challenges. Among the most urgent is the need to develop a more inclusive, culturally sensitive, broad-based environmental agenda that will appeal to many people and unite many sectors of the movement. (Taylor 40–41)[5]

Taylor's recommended culturally sensitive environmental movement implies an ability to acknowledge cultural variants of key concepts such as nature and a historical sensitivity that acknowledges the power struggles among human groups. Absent of the kind of cultural and historical sensitivity Taylor suggests, U.S. environmentalism is left with an identity, or perspective, so narrow that it does not include the economically disadvantaged or people of color like those who make up the constituency of Majora Carter's organization, Sustainable South Bronx. Carter's frustration implies that this identity problem impedes her efforts. In addition, the disparities found in scholarly studies suggest that perceptions about what environmentalism is may hinder the movement at large.

The struggle over the term "nature" in Haki Madhubuti's book *Claiming Earth: Race, Rage, Rape, Redemption; Blacks Seeking Culture of Enlightened Empowerment* demonstrates the barriers erected by discourse dominated by seemingly culture-neutral environmentalism. He writes,

> This is not a "nature" book; however, it is a book about the most precious of natural resources, human beings–specifically Black people in the United States–and our relationship to other people, the earth, and its resources. . . . This book is not an investigation of the environment; rather, it is about

> questioning our noninvolvement in the environmentalist movement. . . . [F]or me, there is something about white supremacy and power, money and greed, politics and governing, land and ownership, agriculture and production, education and self-concepts, addiction and control, attitude and love, dependency and powerlessness that is missing in the very large equation of the Black condition that keeps sending me back to the question I started with: Who owns the earth? (i, ii, v)

Despite a title that announces that he is "claiming Earth," Madhubuti defines his work against "environmental" "investigation." While his attention to ownership, power, and relationship evokes the same language of reclamation that Carter uses, Madhubuti insists that he is not writing a "nature" book. A Chicago-based author and publisher whose publishing and educational institutions create space for other African American voices, he focuses his environmental discussion on "human beings," whom he considers "the most precious of natural resources," a viewpoint that some environmentalists would identify pejoratively as anthropocentric. In fact, the conservation and deep ecology threads of nature writing and environmental literature appear to be at odds with his primary concern for "Black people in the United States," yet Madhubuti's desire to discuss topics such as "white supremacy," "education," "attitude," and "dependency" returns him to "earth," a subject that gives his project kinship with both canonized and radical European American environmental activism and literature.

How might a broader perspective on nature and environment address the identity crisis Carter sees in American environmentalism and the gap between Madhubuti's human-sensitive concerns and nonhuman-centered U.S. environmentalism? What can fill the void they identify? How might people estranged from mainstream environmentalism find a way to reclaim the environmentalist issue? What can erode the difficulties and challenges Walker and Taylor pinpoint?

The environmental justice movement has made great strides in giving marginalized groups an entry point for identifying with American forms of environmentalism. This movement is changing the face and faces of U.S. environmentalism. One of these faces is that of Hazel Johnson, often honored with the title "Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement." Responding to the possible environmental causes of her husband's death, she became the first person to establish an environmental organization in a public housing development. A younger generation of activists now joins her, including people such as her daughter, Cheryl Johnson, current

executive director of the Chicago-based grassroots organization People for Community Recovery, which seeks to empower those in her underserved community to be part of ecological solutions. Another leader is Van Jones, founder of Green for All, a national campaign to generate green jobs for communities suffering from economic and environmental injustice.[6] This kind of work acknowledges the continued environmental alienation born of a history that includes genocide, enslavement, lynching, and segregation. Jones's approach is in keeping with Bailey's attitude toward the tree in the Jena High School courtyard: it calls for both a collective memory that includes the injustices that have made African American existence in the physical environment difficult and for an end to such disparities.

Environmental justice activists insist on the memory and present reality of environmental othering. In addition, environmental justice's central principle is the just distribution of environmental burden and pleasure. This focus on justice applies environmental activism to improving the experience of unprivileged human groups: those living in places that are often antagonistic to human health and the development of environmental affinity. Environmental justice activism is having an impact on movements once only seen as separate. In *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, Robert Bullard writes,

> A groundswell of environmental activism in African-American, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities is emerging all across the country. . . . People of color have invented and, in other cases, adapted existing organizations to meet the disproportionate environmental challenges they face. . . . Drawing together the insights of *both* the civil rights and the environmental movements, these grassroots groups are fighting hard to improve the quality of life for their residents. As a result of their efforts, the environmental justice movement is increasingly influencing and winning support from more conventional environmental and civil rights organizations. (Bullard 24)

The work of environmental justice activists promises not only to include more marginalized people in positive environmental change but also to influence the nature of activism itself.

As environmental justice activism takes place in the United States, leaders from continental Africa have garnered global attention. Ken Saro-Wiwa's campaign against the exploitation of the Ogoni people/region in Nigeria amassed worldwide support before his unjust execution in 1995. Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement, became, in 2004,

the first environmentalist and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.[7] People in Africa and its diaspora are now being recognized as important shapers and contributors to a most necessary global conversation about environmental change. Whether the synonymous identity of people and land in the indigeneity ideology of Saro-Wiwa or Maathai's afforestation program that revitalizes human communities in need of work and environmental protection, these activists' *human-sensitive* foci characterize environmental activism from continental Africans and people of African descent in the diaspora.

Emerging scholarship is registering non-Western forms of environmentalism in Africa and elsewhere in the world. This growing body of scholarship provides global counterparts to European or European American environmental histories and paradigms. Helaine Selin's *Nature across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures* makes the point that "All people everywhere transform nature" (xix). Exploring the environmental views of peoples from "Native America to Aboriginal Australia," the collection seeks to dispel the "essentialist fallacy" that there are always contrary relationships between Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern environmental outlooks (xxi–xxiii). Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier's *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* uses "comparative history" of geographically diverse areas to "[bring] into dialogue . . . socialism and environmentalism" (viii). With its focus on global forms of wilderness conservation, David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus's *The World and the Wild: Expanding Wilderness Conservation beyond Its American Roots* features voices such as Damien Arabagali, a Huli society leader in Papua New Guinea. Arabagali argues, "The peoples of the world should rise up together–arm in arm–and act according to their responsibility for the Earth. The world should come together for the just cause. We must fight for the survival of our human society. We must fight together" (220). He goes on to suggest that establishing a "world environmental body" may curb the impact of exploitative governments and corporations. Inevitably, these books stand to increase the cross-cultural, transnational dialogue and action necessary to address environmental crisis.

U.S. scholars are also providing alternatives to European or European American environmental histories and paradigms with studies of African Americans and institutions at historically black universities. Bullard, founder of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark-Atlanta University, and his colleague Beverly Wright, founder of the Deep South

Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University, are scholar-activists who have established collegiate-affiliated institutions that bring greater environmental awareness and action to academia, the general population, and African American communities. Historiographies such as Sylvia Washington's *Packing Them In: An Archeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865–1954* and Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll's edited collection *"To Love the Wind and the Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* provide scholarly insights into both city-specific and national black environmental experience. Sociology and political science are additional academic fields that benefit respectively from work such as Dorceta Taylor's *Race, Class, Gender, and American Environmentalism* and Kimberly K. Smith's *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations.*

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, global environmental discussion and action expanded to include human populations once on the margins. Human biodiversity now stands to enrich cross-cultural dialogue about environmentalism in ways it has never done before. This inclusive turn comes with caution about simplistically celebrating multicultural approaches to environmentalism that can yield an "over-romanticize[d] and imagine[d] golden age of environmental harmony" (Selin xix). Discriminating analysis that avoids uncritical ethnic cheerleading and is critically robust enough, working outside outmoded approaches, will undoubtedly encourage further reclaiming of the environmentalist issue and cross-cultural examinations of environmental problems vital to the health of humans and nonhumans alike.

This study proposes that such analysis should be directed at African American artistic traditions. Artistic products are a reservoir of moments of insight that wrestle with a history of environmental injustice and a desire for environmental belonging. Black creative action has the potential to address the identity crisis of American environmentalism in ways that social and political action cannot. Creative works address emotional and psychological disconnection from nature. Artistic traditions are a key part of solving the problem at hand because they have been a prime place of ecological agency, particularly when micro- and macroaggressions have discouraged African Americans from natural associations in the physical environment.

At the same time, literary critics have largely overlooked African American ecoliterary traditions.[8] Now is the time for recovery of key texts and critical frameworks that help describe the power of these traditions.[9]

Human groups all over the world reveal that people have consistently used verbal art, oral and written, to describe their beginnings–that is, their ethnogenesis–and their relationships to specific places and nonhuman beings. Humans have also used verbal art to comprehend peoples outside their own human group. For this reason, that an ecoliterary tradition can be found in any human group should be no surprise. As an oppressed minority population, African Americans have had to manage within their ecoliterary tradition the conceptual legacies of their own culture along with racist ideology. Pseudoscientific race theory and postulations about humans and geography loom over African Americans' "natural" vocabulary and their everyday lives.

Racist theories such as so-called scientific racism, social Darwinism, environmental determinism, and eugenicism inform the pernicious images and language circulating in mass media, academic discourse, and everyday conversation. News items from worlds as different as international sport, genetics, and U.S. electoral politics show how many people still embrace these ideas. International soccer fans at the 2006–2007 World Cup routinely used racist taunts against players of African descent. Heckling players with comments about apes reflected the history of associating Africanity with nonhuman primates (Arroyave). In the international scientific community, biologist and Nobel Prize winner James D. Watson's assertions about African and European intelligence led to an apology and his resignation from his position as chancellor of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (Dean). Yet, as a scientist who held high-profile positions of power for decades, his racist views sanctioned a culture in science that impeded black success with information that clearly came from pseudoscientific work. More recently, Mike Norman offered for sale in his bar in Marietta, Georgia, a T-shirt mocking the U.S. presidential campaign of Barack Obama. Hearkening to the idea that people of African descent are somehow links between nonhuman primates and *Homo sapiens*, the shirt displays a monkey holding a banana above the phrase "Obama '08" (Gumbrecht and Boone). The span of these incidents demonstrates the pervasiveness of racist pseudoscience that influences how continental and diasporic Africans are perceived, and, in some cases, influences how they see themselves.

Scholars have recorded the ways pseudoscientific theory also supports the idea that people of African descent are intellectually ill-equipped to provide insight on or proper stewardship of themselves or other parts of

the natural world. Examining public policy, Sylvia Washington contends that racist ideologies facilitated "a paradigm of race and concomitant rights to American enfranchisement that became the operative and core episteme for determining the types of citizenry that would be entitled to salient 'green space' into the twenty-first century" (*Packing Them In* 21). She concludes, in her study of Chicago from 1865 to 1954, that "geographical and spatial restrictions placed on people of color and ethnic groups by residential bombings, restrictive covenants, redlining, and both private and public housing policies were organic societal techniques of discipline that led to forced segregation and eventually environmentally compromised and unsustainable communities for more than two-thirds of the twentieth century" (18). Through the lens of race theory, Janet Gabler-Hover explores how "blackness" surfaces or recedes for scholars writing about John James Audubon, famed naturalist and artist. She concludes that "the Audubon story reveals the process of disavowal by which nineteenth-century white America denied the substantive cultural contributions of black Americans to American cultural identity" (5). Kimberly Smith charts how scientific racism influenced the political theory of elite black male leaders such as Marcus Garvey, Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke and informed their ideas about "blacks' relationship to nature and to the American and African continents" (119). Responding to the negative assumptions of racist ideologies, several leaders debunked these ideas and endorsed the "concept of black folk as a uniquely creative force in American culture" "by virtue of their relationship to nature" (125–26).

Language is a key tool in how people relate to nature. Since language also carries the conceptual legacy of racist ideology, it is a key tool in the creation and maintenance of human hierarchies that often put people of African descent among those at the bottom where they are subhumans unable to speak for nature. Simply put, language, in the form of speech or documents used by those with power, has been employed to keep people of African descent in undesirable places. (To exacerbate this, denying and criminalizing scribal literacy acquisition supported racialized slavery.) Verbal art is crucial to understanding the ways in which African Americans have engaged ecology because it has been an imaginative tool that allowed African Americans to insist on sophisticated relationships with human and nonhuman nature despite the social scripts that have denied their authority to do so.

While ecocriticism has provided ways to better understand how verbal art conveys ecological ideas, its guideposts have been built largely from European American environmental literature. Critical guideposts based solely on the experiences of European Americans neglect the experiences of negatively racialized Americans who also have struggled for connection with nonhuman nature and are therefore insufficient in illuminating African American ecological perspectives. There is a need for a broader investigation of the language and categories of ecological art, particularly critiques of authors from traditionally marginalized groups. Given the historical and contemporary denial of African American ecological aptitude, limiting terminology and paradigms must change. As noted by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, "If ecocriticism limits itself to the study of one genre—the personal narrative of the Anglo-American nature writing tradition—or to one physical landscape—the ostensibly untrammeled American wilderness—it risks seriously misrepresenting the significance of multiple natural and built environments to writers with other ethnic, national, or racial affiliations" (7). Indeed, if we are to transform the figurative and actual white trees of ecological exclusion, we must expand ecocritical language to befit a more representative imaginative landscape.

A Black Tree

The winds roared and the rain fell,
The poor white man, faint and weary
    Came and sat under our tree.
He has no mother to bring him milk,
    no wife to grind him corn . . .

Go, white man, go—but with thee bear
The Negro's wish, the Negro's prayer;
    Remembrance of the Negro's care.
      —African American Folk Song
      (Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians*, 37)

Unlike the tree in Jena High School's schoolyard, the tree in this folk song is associated with cross-cultural aid and fellowship. The tree and the Negroes associated with it provide environmental refuge and physical

sustenance to a racial outsider. Yet the song's authors are concerned that the poor white man in the song will forget the benevolence of his Negro peers. Implicit to these lines is the idea that African Americans have something to contribute that should be treasured and remain a part of collective memory, if the song is interpreted as symbolic of the larger American history. U.S. environmental history and ecocriticism have largely overlooked "remembrance of the Negro's care"; however, enough remains in the historical and artistic record to remedy this omission.

Maud Cuney-Hare is one African American scholar whose work facilitates the reclamation of African American ecoliterature. Born into a prominent family in Galveston, Texas (b. 1874), Cuney-Hare grew into her own acclaim as a musician, scholar, and author.[10] Cuney-Hare's prolific work as a scholar and compiler makes visible landmarks that signify the range of African American ecological vision. The song-epigraph above (made part of the historical record because of her) represents the part of African American ecological vision that takes shape in collective, performative (often ritualistic) artistic production; it is not attributed to a single author. Folk songs like this provide a record of African American creativity in the face of historic sanctions against acquiring scribal literacy and in the context of the immense popularity of oral culture. Appearing in Cuney-Hare's 1936 study *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, the song is not packaged conveniently into a collection of explicitly designated "nature songs"; instead, it appears as part of the larger body of African American music. Buried within the pages of Cuney-Hare's musicological scholarship, this song suggests that continued reclamation of African American ecological vision should involve review of folklore/orature and oral history in an effort to chart African American eco-art.

However, Cuney-Hare also upheld the value of artistic production from scribal culture as well. *Message of the Trees: An Anthology of Leaves and Branches* (1918),[11] an example of her work as a compiler, represents a multicultural eco-artistic record that includes the voices of African American writers. As historian Douglas Hales explains, "The book represents a significant achievement" (113). In fact, *Message of the Trees* may be the first multicultural collection of nature writing published in the United States. Her editorial scope includes authors from the British canon such as Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser alongside what would become a European American male canon of nature writers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir. Asian writing traditions are repre-

sented by individual authors such as Bashō and Shimazaki (Haruki) along with poems credited to "the Chinese"; Arabian poet Ahmed Ben Yousef Almenazy is also included. Ethelwyn Wetherald; Anne, Countess of Winchilsea; Mrs. E. C. Kinney; and Charlotte Perkins Stetson are among numerous European and European American (U.S. and Canadian) female authors in the collection. But the anthology does not include authors from sizeable U.S. cultural groups; noticeably absent are American Indian, Latino/a, and African American women authors. However, it does benefit from the work of two African American men: William Stanley Braithwaite composed the introduction, and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "The Haunted Oak" appears in a section titled "Bare Ruin'd Choirs." The sentiments in Braithwaite's introductory comments and Dunbar's poem symbolize the framework for the messages of this study, a framework I have described as the ecological burden-and-beauty paradox.

Braithwaite's and Dunbar's pieces in *Message of the Trees* represent both aspects of this paradox. Dunbar's poem highlights one phenomenon of environmental othering: the racialized mob violence that is a part of America's history of lynching. The poetic voice begins by asking an oak tree why it is "so bare" and why it "runs a shudder" over those who encounter its shade. The "tree" details its various responses to being made complicit in the killing of a "guiltless victim," suggesting that other natural elements also acknowledge the crime (e.g., a howling dog and wailing wind). The tree serves as a witness to the pursuit, kidnapping,[12] and torture of the lynching victim and indicts a judge, a doctor, and a minister and his oldest son as perpetrators of the crime. These perpetrators symbolize the forces of law, medicine, religion, and nonhuman nature all working against the male victim. While after the lynching the judge is able to return to the wilderness site and hunt for deer, "another rides his soul / In the guise of a mortal fear." Likewise, the "burned," "dried," and "dead" tree must bear the "haunting" "curse" of the "guiltless man" (Cuney-Hare, *Message of the Trees*, 183, 185).[13] Braithwaite's insights herald natural beauty. He advocates for appreciation of trees as "God's first temples" and indicts the limitations of organized, Western religion's built sanctuaries. He boldly contends that "the petty, narrow, dogmatic differences" of religions that worship "uncomfortably" in "angular, box-like" "ecclesiastical buildings" "would be lost in a temple whose roof was the firmament, and congregations and religion itself would be healthier for the change" (Cuney-Hare, *Message of the Trees*, v). Braithwaite's commentary shows imaginative African American

discourse that is not limited to the "burden" of dehumanizing societal acts and scripts. He takes inspiration from nonhuman nature to suggest ways to improve social conditions in his bold comments about what he sees as shortcomings in organized religion. While African Americans of Braithwaithe's and Dunbar's day suffered from environmental restriction, they did not wait to be sanctioned as entitled environmental speakers; they authorized their own voices and registered the burdens and beauties of their experiences and desires.

By sitting under the figurative "black trees" of African American verbal eco-art, it is possible to understand more about the ecological burden-and-beauty paradox. People of African descent endure the burden and enjoy the beauty of being natural. They bear the burden of a historical and present era of environmental alienation while they also come from and transform cultural traditions that enable—in fact, encourage—human and nonhuman affinity. African Americans struggle against the burden of societal scripts that make them ecological pariahs, yet they enjoy the beauty of liberating themselves and acting outside of these scripts. Their ecological outlook is informed both by the collective experience of being placed among those at the bottom of human hierarchies and their visionary responses to nature itself. This has resulted in traditions of figurative and actual ecological care that extend not only to fellow humans but also to nonhuman nature. Although societal impediments mean that African Americans are intimately familiar with environmental alienation on an individual as well as a collective level, this fact does not obliterate African American artists' imaginative responses to nature's splendor.

The psychological promise of analyzing the beauty and burden together is that it gives African Americans a point of entry into ecological discussion that includes but is not limited to domination. The African American authors and characters here are agents whose imaginations are not limited by the stimuli of oppression but whose intellectual vibrancy is capable of negotiating domination and imaginative work outside oppression's bounds. In the combination of the burden and beauty resides a story the world should hear. The paradox holds within it the articulation of a wide range of African American eco-experience in one dynamic story.

What the works in *Black on Earth* prove is that the concept of ecological burden and beauty informs a number of literary styles. My purpose in discussing the range of genres and historical periods in this study is to

identify a theory that functions across form and time. This paradox is flexible enough to encompass various ecological burdens and beauties (and moments of simultaneity) as African American authors employ a host of verbal styles and modes. The ecological burden-and-beauty paradox is an aquifer that feeds much of African American ecoliterary production.

Although this literature raises awareness about issues reflective of human-sensitive environmental justice activism (waste sitings, toxic dumps, human body burdens), its scope goes beyond critical frameworks driven by environmental justice. For instance, Julie Sze identifies that "environmental justice literature" (which "privileges sociological analysis") has expanded to the fictional "literature of environmental justice." In her reading of Japanese American author Karen Yamashita's novel *The Tropic of Orange*, Sze asserts, "Literature offers a new way of looking at environmental justice, through visual images and metaphors, not solely through the prism of statistics. This new way of looking references the 'real' problems of communities struggling against environmental racism, and is simultaneously liberated from providing a strictly documentary account of the contemporary world" (163). Sze explains rightly that literature contributes to increased environmental justice in ways unavailable to other disciplines. However, the texts in this book are not only reactions to environmental injustice but also artistic reflections that move beyond the limitations of an environmental context to the advantages of an ecological foundation. One such advantage is a sharper conception of nature. Because one of the connotations of the term "environment" is as a place outside the human body, environmentalism (and even environmental justice to some degree) is associated with an anthropocentrism/biocentrism binary that inadequately separates human beings from other forms of nature. Another advantage is the opportunity to review U.S. environmental policy with disenfranchised human communities in mind. This does not remove the responsibility of the marginalized to act in sustainable ways. However, as Sylvia Mayer writes, it does allow "for an assessment of environmental responsibilities [that 'takes into account'] a human being's and/or a social community's position in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender" (3).

The scope of their environmental experience, the limitations placed on African American humanity, the challenge of knowing both ecological burden and beauty, and the healthy suspicion many African Americans have had of mainstream environmental movements call for a better

theoretical foundation. Thus, I believe that striking out from terminology rooted in the concept of "environment," such as environmentalism, environmental justice, and environmental literature, in preference for terms with their foundation in ecology, such as "ecoliterary," "ecological," and "ecocriticism," is justified by the African American literary and cultural traditions examined here.

The working definition of "ecology" for *Black on Earth* is *the study of the often overlapping experience of relationships among humans and among humans and nonhuman nature.* Ecology, as it is used in this book, presupposes that (1) humans are indeed "natural"; (2) humans have developed a powerful and distinct culture within nature; and (3) cultural definitions of "humanity" influence an individual's experiences among humans and with nonhuman nature. In this book I leave unchanged other writers' use of terms associated with "environment"; however, I restrict my use of the term to instances where I refer to natural and/or built locations outside the human body (e.g., farm, forest, school, city, and suburb) or when speaking about environmentalism: the historical and present-day discourse and movement that have focused traditionally on nonhuman nature. The following paragraphs highlight commentary from several scholars whose ideas inform this definition and the permutations of "ecology" relevant to this study.

Murray Bookchin's concept of social ecology speaks eloquently to the way in which a study of human relationships is a necessary complement to ecological study that has typically concentrated on nonhuman nature. He writes, "One of nature's very unique species, *homo sapiens*, has slowly and painstakingly developed from the natural world into a unique social world of its own. As both worlds interact with each other through highly complex phases of evolution, it has become as important to speak of a social ecology as to speak of a natural ecology" (86). African Americans and other oppressed peoples have struggled to obtain and maintain influence in the social world just as they have sought to influence their relationships within nonhuman nature. Often, however, the force of oppression in the social world has left African Americans so limited as ecological agents that relationship with nonhuman nature becomes unfathomable, undesirable, or impossible. African Americans' associations with environmentalism often reflect a history of limited ecological agency and policies that marginalized environmental others from desirable domains in the United States.

The African American ecoliterature explicated here reflects the fact that experience within the social world has been impacted greatly by the conception of "human" itself. Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo, in his essay "Africa: Human Nature as Historical Process," acknowledges humans as "*a form of authentic nature*"; nevertheless, he historicizes "humanness" to illuminate its power in discussions of "nature" (4, emphasis in original). Given the import of this history to African American ecoliterature, I offer an extended citation from his vital essay:

> Our identification as humans is the result of a twofold movement of historic singularity: the distinction of genus through the creation of a classificatory order of all the elements of the physical world, and the distinction of sameness through the establishment of a cultural scale, based on an active positivism, responsible for determining our distance to the savage world. Notwithstanding the African desire to affirm the nobility of being black, we must recognize that slavery and colonization have produced images that lead toward a reinvestigation of an African humanity that has been contested by others, one covered by layers of humiliation and based on the moral effects of an ecological crisis. The question of the African's relationship to nature implies that we first acknowledge the consequences of these forms of dissidence, of the hierarchization of humanities by establishing, beginning with African history, the status of natural elements, including that of humankind itself. (6)

The gap between nobility and contested African humanity creates a dissidence that has circumscribed African-descended people's ecological standing. Ouédraogo's explication of the emergence of "human" helps illuminate the ways the category has been both an accurate description of genus and a method of "fixing of racial, class and gender stereotypes in the service of European colonial expansion" (Legler 73). This is one reason that terminology, such as "environmental," which is associated with an anthropocentrism/biocentrism binary that ignores the unequal experience of humanness, is inadequate for a study of African American ecoliterature. Because of a dual experience of societal exploitation and cultural conceptualizations of nature that include human beings, people of African descent have been aware of human beings as natural facts even while their status as human was questioned. Therefore, the literature in this book challenges the legitimacy of binaries such as human/animal, human/nature, and anthropocentrism/biocentrism. The texts in this study reveal cultural traditions that make binaries such as these moot as well as the consequences of the unequal application of the term "human."

If, as John Rensenbrink suggests, "Ecology invites us, pushes us, into a new paradigm that in turn has implications for every field of endeavor" (2), what is its potential in a discussion of African American verbal art? Foremost, as a theoretical frame, ecology helps illuminate how African American authors understand human beings as part of the natural world. It also puts readers in a position to better discern the interconnectedness of social and natural systems. Experienced with the triumphs and troubles of life among those at the bottom of human hierarchies, African Americans have a keen knowledge of the ecological implications of social systems; at the same time, their closeness to nonhuman nature, both forced and voluntary, gives them an opportunity to reflect on how these social systems have ecological impacts for nonhumans. A deep knowledge about the human and nonhuman consequences of social systems is reflected in the human-sensitive ecological perspectives of the literature and oral history here. It is a verbal tradition that demands that human health be a point of departure for any progressive ecological vision and activism. An ecological outlook that acknowledges the history of humanness also has the potential to generate "a new human nature freed of the foreclosure and egotism of the past" (Ouédraogo 35). This new human nature may be sophisticated enough to inspire human culture to forge ecological discourse and action in a nonhegemonic manner. This literature reveals the ethical needs that will move us to improve life for several members of the natural community.

How This Book Is Organized

The primary texts here were chosen for their ability to demonstrate various facets of the ecological burden-and-beauty paradox. As an African Americanist who concentrates on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, I noticed that the period of enslavement and the subsequent history of racial discrimination figured heavily in contemporary African American ecoliterature. Therefore, I sought out nineteenth-century texts and the oral history of the Federal Writers' Project Former Slave Narratives to help me represent ecoliterature from the perspective of African Americans who experienced enslavement. This is an important companion to the significance that contemporary writers give to the history of American enslavement. Although *Black on Earth* is not presented as a comprehensive study of African American ecoliterature, it contains a diversity of texts that

support the significance of my central theory, which should be useful for future study. Rather than snapshots of African American literary tradition in successive eras, this book highlights topics that distinguish African American ecological insight: work, citizenship, enslavement, ancestry, religion, region, myth, and music. These foci serve as touchstones for a broad understanding of aspects of ecological burden and beauty.

Additionally, the book itself and each chapter are inspired by the call-and-response tradition in African American expressive culture. Call-and-response celebrates the oral tradition in African and African American cultures that encourages a participatory relationship between speaker and audience (especially vibrant in performances and religious worship). The book itself is a response to a call that can be heard from the momentous work in environmental justice and areas of humanistic and scientific ecological study that take into consideration the role of race and culture. This activism and scholarship have created a call for a better understanding of how people of African descent engage ecological issues. *Black on Earth* responds by adding to the study of ecological concerns examples of African American verbal art. In each chapter, the call consists of provocative history, traditions, images, and questions deserving of a response. Each call sets the stage for the extended readings of primary texts in the response. I use the call-and-response format to highlight the diversity within African American ecological imaginings and to stress the idea that the conversations provoked by this verbal art are ongoing.

In chapter 1, "'Toil and Soil': Authorizing Work and Enslavement," the call explains the detriments of an ecological outlook solely informed by recreation and leisure. It encourages us to confront the inconvenient history of U.S. enslavement and consider how work can inform an ecological outlook with serious merit through the words of "authors" who experienced enslavement, the most extreme example of ecological burden in my study. It points to the unequal experience of the category of human in antebellum and postbellum America. The severity of the enslaved's work conditions endangered their notion of themselves as human and their affinity for nonhuman nature. These texts demonstrate that although full expression of humanness was largely impossible for these authors, they used their work experience to express their human value and their connection to nonhuman nature. The "authors" include George Moses Horton (who was able to obtain scribal literacy during his enslavement) and Albery Whitman (enslaved for the first twelve years of his life), and

contributors to the Federal Writers' Project Former Slave Narratives. Their combined voices give us a strong sense of their ecological agency and how this agency often provided solace in the absence of national belonging.

Chapter 2, "York, Harriet, and George: Writing African American Ecological Ancestors," allows us to consider what artists accomplish by creatively inhabiting the lives of people in the past. This chapter examines how contemporary neo–slave poetry inhabits the past through the lives of what I term "African American ecological ancestors": York, the enslaved body servant of William Clark; Harriet Tubman, Underground Railroad conductor; and George Washington Carver, agricultural scientist. These ancestors' lives are uniquely their own; however, their individual histories cast in neo–slave poetry reveal recurrent themes in African American ecological experience including movement, botanical knowledge, religion, and science. The poets, Frank X Walker, Quarysh Lansana, and Marilyn Nelson, create collective biographies of ecological agents in which it is clear that each poet re-creates the life of a unique individual who also can be claimed as an African American ecological ancestor.

Chapter 3, "Animal Nature: Finding Ecotheology," acknowledges the ways African Americans have used religion as a moral compass and as a tool for social progress. Christianity, in particular, represented a burden-and-beauty paradox of its own because it was used not only to justify slavery but also for African American liberation. Octavia Butler and Alice Walker are two authors who see the Bible as having potential as a book that informs ecological progress; however, they also advocate going beyond its covers to find greater efficacy for ecological advancement. Both authors suggest that religion be used to cope with our inescapable animality and African Americans' history of exclusion with regard to the category "human being." Their work suggests that the long history of African American religious syncretism continues and provides fresh insight into our conceptions of book-based and Earth-based religious practice.

Chapter 4, "Bones and Water: Telling on Myth," takes up the issue of American regions, myth, and African American ecological experience. Two authors representing different geographies, Percival Everett and Henry Dumas, allow readers to contemplate the literary functions of myth and how it facilitates or constricts ecological agency. Everett's work on the American West suggests that, to make social progress, certain mythologies must be undone and transformed. Dumas, working on a South/North axis, illustrates how mythologies must be created and honored to ensure

the ecological treasure of groups and their success once migration has occurred. His mythology also addresses the trauma of forced migration and the need for mythology after mass migration transforms a group's environmental experience. Both authors deal with geographic movement and group identity.

In chapter 5, "'I Got the Blues' Epistemology: Thinking a Way out of Eco-Crisis," I explore how page and performance poet Jayne Cortez uses the blues as an approach to addressing the ecological consequences of being at the bottom of human hierarchies. Cortez's poetry reflects a world suffering from the rapaciousness of imperialism, militarism, racism, and consumerism. Those without power suffer the most, and she employs surrealism to jolt readers into viewing the world with a blues epistemology. Her work paints a grim picture of ignorance of our present ecological conditions and suggests that if the societal ills she highlights continue, we will destroy our very ability to survive. Her vision is cataclysmic enough to be called apocalyptic, yet other aspects of her work suggest "precautionary" as a more accurate description, for the epistemological promises of the blues suggest hope in the face of dire circumstances.

The conclusion, "After Levee Disaster: Learning from a Sinned-against City," explicates post–2005 levee disaster New Orleans, Louisiana, as a symbol of the various topics in my book. Conceived before the 2005 levee disaster, my original book project included a chapter that would have explored the ecocritical dimensions of writing from African American New Orleanians. As I watched and read reports after Hurricane Katrina and the levee disaster, my understanding of New Orleans and its residents as an undeserved emblem of my central paradox grew. I plan further ecocritical study of New Orleans' African-descended culture pre– and post–levee disaster. For now, I conclude this book with a call to recognize how New Orleans serves as a symbol for this project and an inspiration to change the terms of citizenship. The call-and-response for this conclusion takes the shape of a "Dirge and Second Line": parts of the city's world-renowned jazz funeral tradition.

While there is much to be gained from analyzing these African American voices as part of a cultural tradition, I enter this study into the critical record in the hopes that this work will engender multicultural dialogues–along with comparative studies such as Jeffery Myers's *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature*, multicultural anthologies such as Maud Cuney-Hare's *Message of the Trees*, and, more

recently, Alison Deming and Lauret Savoy's *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*–that put African American eco-art alongside work from other traditions. The time has come for an intracultural study of African American ecological authorship, yet the urgency for cross-cultural ecological dialogue and action cannot be overstated.

ONE

"Toil and Soil"

Authorizing Work and Enslavement

Work left unfinished has consequences.
Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature" (1995)

'Tis like the loss of Paradise,
Or Eden's garden left in gloom,
Where grief affords us no device;
Such is thy lot, my native home . . .
How can I from my seat remove
And leave my ever devoted home,
And the dear garden which I love,
The beauty of my native home?
George Moses Horton, "The Southern Refugee" (1865)

To hear, and write at candor's earnest call
That I may answer if mankind shall ask,
In truth–this be my aim, this be my further task.
Albery A. Whitman, *Rape of Florida* (1884)

Call: Work and American Ecological Narrative

Public awareness about global climate change increased precipitously as a result of the imaginative and intellectual work of former U.S. vice president Al Gore. The book and documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* garnered international acclaim and awards, stimulating individuals and organizations to take specific actions to reduce their ecological footprint. However, both the book and the film reflect a strain of environmentalism informed by a limited triumvirate of *W*s: wilderness, the West, and whiteness. For instance, in the book's section "Across the Wilderness," Gore

writes, "When I returned from Vietnam in 1971, my wife, Tipper, and I bought a tent, a Coleman stove, a lantern, and two backpacks. Then we threw them in the trunk of our Chevrolet Impala and drove across the country, from Nashville to California, and back again, camping out all along the way" (158). The next year they traveled to Colorado's Rocky Mountains in the Impala; in later years, they took their children on similar trips.

Gore's narrative of traversing the United States in a fossil-fuel-powered automobile includes no mention of carbon emissions. Rather, the reader is invited to imagine the country's physical beauty and to understand concurrently a presumed environmental benefit of these trips. Gore and his family enact one of America's celebrated environmental activities: white families journeying westward through America's grand wilderness. Inherent in this narrative of traveling to distant wilderness in a polluting vehicle is the idea that leisure heightened by appreciation of landscape outweighs the cost of the pollution that such trips produce. Yet, while explicitly inscribing a sense of national and ecological belonging, the trip's narrative implicitly reflects experiences limited primarily to those who enjoy the unencumbered travel that white privilege often affords.

The book and film also support the importance of direct encounter with America's distant wilderness by explaining that it is a treasure that we can offer as a legacy to following generations. That many Americans may never see it does not matter. As part of the conclusion of the film, Gore marshals a sense of shared heritage to curb global climate change by assuring audiences of America's significant accomplishment in the face of difficult work. A montage of images reminds audiences of achievements such as the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and victory in World War II. He tries to convince his audience that they have the fortitude to do the hard work necessary to change the planet's future.

However, one part of America's work must be listening to uncelebrated ecological narratives from the past to help us with the present. These voices–to be heard in a multitude of forms, texts, and archives–simultaneously express diverse ecological experiences and expand from the conceptual frame of American environmentalism to an ecological frame informed not just by the three *W*s, but by work and enslavement as well.

Reflecting on the absence of work within the frame of U.S. environmentalism, Richard White explains, "Environmentalists so often seem self-righteous, privileged, and arrogant because they so readily consent

to identifying nature with play and making it by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not to work, stay, or live" (173). In White's view, American environmentalism has been foolishly ignoring work as a useful context for progressive change. Seeing work as something that we stop doing to enjoy the leisurely experience of nature has not been enough to advance environmentalists' causes; it merely supports the notion that "the original human relation with nature was one of leisure and that the first white men in North America glimpsed and briefly shared that relation" (White 175). In shifting our attention to the ecological frame I set forth in the introduction, I am inspired by White's assertion that a focus on work can better inform discourse about the natural world.[1]

One benefit of thinking in this direction may be a clearer appreciation of human beings as part of a larger natural workforce that includes nonhuman nature. In her book *The Work of Nature: How the Diversity of Life Sustains Us*, Yvonne Baskin points out that "ethical and moral pleas for saving species still predominate" in American environmental efforts and that "human societies have a sad history of setting moral burdens aside while acquiring more comfortable or prosperous lifestyles." She concludes that "stewardship" and "moral commitment ha[ve] proven a slippery foundation for conservation" (13–14). Baskin suggests that appealing to human interests in self-preservation may encourage greater advocacy for the "life-support services" of nonhuman nature, such as oxygen and food supply. She writes, "Self-preservation is no substitute for ethics, but it's a strong companion, less easily brushed aside in the hubbub of business as usual" (223). Indeed, identifying ourselves as natural workers can move us toward greater compatibility with the work that nonhuman nature is doing. In other words, seeing ourselves as one type of natural worker may encourage us to better appreciate the ecological consequences of all our actions, whether they are related to our jobs or our recreation.

An ecocritical focus on work also has the benefit of more accurately representing the lives of Americans in the past. This could give us a better sense of the daily lived ecological experiences of African Americans during enslavement and other working Americans. As Al Young writes, "Most Americans [in the nineteenth century] . . . who knew anything about nature, knew it through work. They hunted and trapped or fished for food; they farmed and preserved" (Deming and Savoy 117). What does it mean when work, rather than leisure, is your central ecological experience? What does it mean when work is compounded by the inconvenient

history of enslavement? What happens when work and enslavement influence our discussions about ecology in contemporary America?

The work of the enslaved is not missing from all areas of American discourse. In fact, in the reparations movement it is central. One aim of this movement is a monetary award to compensate, at least in part, for centuries of unfree and unpaid labor. Activists have worked for nearly 150 years to put discussion about reparations on the national agenda. Because of the efforts of U.S. Congressman John Conyers, reparations garnered attention in the nation's capital on December 17, 2007. The House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties sponsored an Oversight Hearing on the Legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Contemporary academics and activists argued for and against H.R. 40, which would "study the impact of slavery on the social, political, and economic life of our nation" (Wells 2). National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) cochair Kibibi Tyehimba revisits the moment of emancipation, noting, "After reaping the benefits of free labor, in 1865 the federal government freed 4 million Blacks in January, no less, to wander the countryside, one of the coldest months of the winter, without a dime, with no property, and largely illiterate, leaving few choices for the freed African peoples other than to exist in virtual slavery locked in place by Black Codes, convict lease, peonage, and cleverly crafted share cropping schemes" (Tyehimba 3). He describes a group of people freed from the ecological burden of legalized enslavement only to be met with another set of burdensome circumstances from their unsupported entry into the wage-labor force.

The comments of Patsy Mitchner, enslaved in North Carolina, mirror Tyehimba's observation. She describes slavery and freedom as two poison-filled snakes, one pointed with its head facing south and the other pointed north. In her estimation, "Both bit de nigger, an' dey wus both bad" (Rawick, North Carolina Narratives, vol. 1, part 2, 123). Tommy Wells, president of the American Bar Association, feels that a federal study of slavery may provide some insight into links between the past and present. He argues that enslavement "poses difficult questions about the present effects of past denials of justice" (Wells 6). These denials of justice have present economic and ecological effects. Whether two centuries in the past or now, many African Americans have been denied kinship with and ownership of the land; for them, stigmatized membership in the national fabric is the norm. Supporting H.R. 40, Eric J. Miller remarked, "Finding

the means to talk about the history and legacy of slavery and segregation for America has hardly begun. It cannot properly start until we have some shared understanding of the still-hidden aspects of slavery and segregation upon which our community is based" (2).

Finding the means to talk about the lasting impact of slavery can begin with locating and listening to the words of those who experienced it. Their words and experiences can doubly benefit efforts toward justice and ecological progress. Through ecocriticism about work and enslavement, I aim to begin completing the unfinished work referenced in this chapter's epigraph, which involves including the voices of those who experienced U.S. enslavement in a discussion of nation, labor, and ecological perspective.

What might be the nature of the ecological perspectives of the enslaved? Does the near omnipresence of forced labor in the antebellum era constrain their ecological perspectives? Nicholas Bromell, in *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*, questions whether involuntary labor may have acted as a conceptual lock on the enslaved. He writes, "Deprived for the most part of control over his or her labor, and robbed for the most part of labor's product, the slave lived within work as within a state of punishment that had no origin, no termination, no narrative. Work was neither means nor end. It was simply what one was born to do. How, then, could it possibly have meaning, much less redemptive possibilities?" (182). The enslaved were left with the ontological struggle to find meaning in lives filled with unpaid, unfree toil. Indeed, redemptive possibilities were readily found in believing that enslavement did not make them slaves bereft of humanity or imagination, as so many of the enslaved point out. In addition, redemptive possibilities came from expressing natural affinities even in the absence of agency as U.S. citizens. Connections to nonhuman nature through work helped when coping with the lack of national belonging. Much of their work was no doubt grueling and painful; nevertheless, enslavement left people with the task of forging an ecological perspective firmly in the grasp of both the burden and beauty of being natural. They forged identities as ecological participants based on their work rather than a privileged position in the social fabric. Thus, enslavement did not obliterate the potential for multiple, often positive associations with the natural world.

Therefore, as the reparations movement strives to yield a monetary legacy, its efforts are complemented by the enslaved's conceptual legacy, which, in part, pertains to their ecological perspective. This perspective is

fully aware that humans exist in a matrix of natural and social orders; our associations with both orders can be in conflict for this reason. Amid intellectual, imaginative, and physical labor, this conceptual reality loomed. The enslaved tried with varying results to reconcile experiences in the natural order and the social order.

Enslaved voices in America's artistic-historical record detail how people coped with racialized slavery that described them pejoratively as being natural, along with ever-present agricultural toil and violence. Yet this record suffers from limited evidence of oral art and the criminalization of scribal literacy for the enslaved population. Despite these challenges, ecocritical scholarship has emerged that examines the texts of those who did acquire scribal literacy.[2] But the most common frame for these analyses is the former slave narrative as abolitionist text.

Slave narratives might seem, at first glance, to be the very texts to reveal connections between enslavement and ecological perspective, particularly because of their comparatively high numbers in contrast to records of other forms of literature or orature by the enslaved. But Kimberly Smith explicitly cautions against reading such abolitionist slave narratives as comprehensive documents for understanding the ecological perspectives of the enslaved. She writes, "We must be cautious . . . in generalizing about slaves' beliefs about nature without paying close attention to the rhetorical context in which those beliefs are deployed." She also notes, "Neither slaves nor their masters consistently viewed nature from a single perspective" (Smith 37, 31). I concur with Smith that rhetorical context and the lack of uniform perspective are important to consider when examining the texts of the enslaved. At the same time, the diversity of perspectives and rhetorical contexts often hinged on the challenges to African American belonging in the natural order and the social order.

This awareness of a twin belonging–or lack of belonging–during the antebellum period has left an identifiable heritage that Mart A. Stewart has described as the source of "general qualities of African American environmental politics." He writes, in "Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism," that these qualities are "the pursuit of collective rights, the tendency to see community in broad terms that include both humans and non-humans, [and] the connection of environmental concerns to the world of work and production rather than to lifestyle choices and consumption" (Stewart 20). Work in many forms (e.g., agrarian, intellectual, imaginative, survival, society building) helped African

Americans negotiate ecological belonging and compromised national citizenship. Central to this belonging was the idea that African Americans were fully human and needed to be, as Jeremy Bendik-Keymer suggests in *The Ecological Life: Discovering Citizenship and a Sense of Humanity*, "ecological," that is, "in a moral and healthy relationship to the natural world" (17). To do so, they often sought out nonhuman nature to coauthorize their value.

The voices in this chapter sound many notes in a mix of nation, nature, work, and enslavement. This chapter is a call to understand the role of work in the ecological perspectives of African Americans who experienced enslavement. Here are voices of those with marginal scribal literacy and those who made creative writing, specifically poetry, part of their work. This chapter is a call to listen to early nature thinkers who expressed ecological belonging even in the absence of national citizenship. Ever present in their voices is hope for greater reciprocity between the natural order and social order.

Response: "Seasons and soil give testimony"[3]

The Works Progress Administration generated the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) during the Depression as a relief program for writers in need of work. Monty Penkower suggests that the FWP overcame many challenges and became "an agency of conservation and rehabilitation of skills and professional pride" (vii). One successful FWP effort–the conservation of the voices of Americans who had survived enslavement (collected in earnest between 1936 and 1938)–extended the historical record to include a population for whom scribal literacy was marginal.[4] This unique project authorized the lives of everyday people, writing the enslaved into a version of American history that bore on it the stamp of the U.S. government. While the discussion in this chapter can highlight only a few of the over two thousand contributors to the Former Slave Narratives, it includes these voices because it is important to recognize that both oral and written verbal art were part of the imaginative toolbox of the enslaved. Juxtaposing the ideas of the enslaved who did not or could not write with those who undertook writing as a mode of work gives a better depiction of the range of labor during and after enslavement. Because they were recorded in the 1930s, the oral histories are also beyond the rhetorical frame of antebellum abolitionism. The FWP's record includes the thoughts of people

with varying roles as slaves (child, field hand, house slave) and is invaluable in its documentation of the voices of many for whom forced work circumscribed ecological relationships.

What do we learn of how the enslaved viewed the land? The success of allotment gardens on plantations to grow produce for the enslaved's sale or consumption reveals that grueling, forced agricultural labor for cash crops did not preempt desire for voluntary agricultural work. Willis Cofer, enslaved in Georgia, explains:

> Marster let [the enslaved] have land to wuk for deyselves, but dey had to wuk it atter dey come out of his fields. All dey made on dis land wuz dier own to sell and do what dey wanted to wid. Lots of 'em plowed and hoed by moonlight do make dier own crops. . . . De fus Sadday atter Easter waz allus a holiday for de slaves. Us wuz proud of dat day 'cause dat wuz onlies' day in de year a nigger could do 'zactly what he pleased. Dey could go huntin', fishin' or visitin', but most of 'em used it to put in a good days wuk on de land what Marster 'lowed 'em to use for deyselves. (Rawick, Georgia Narratives, vol. 4, part 1, 204–5)

Cofer's comments reveal determination to express agency over their own work and to apply their agricultural knowledge to land they could control. In a demanding schedule that permitted little time for individual choice (described by some as working from "c'aint see to c'aint see"), the enslaved chose to work on their own crops by moonlight not only after a full day of labor but also on a holiday. The record of an FWP interview with "Uncle Henry" Barnes, enslaved in Alabama, also expresses the pride in agency that working allotment plots fostered. He remarks, "De niggers was 'lowed to hab a li'l patch of dey own, dat dey could wuk at night an' Sat'day ebenin'! What dey make on dis patch was dey'n, an' Ole Marster pay 'em money for hit. Nobody didn't make de niggers wuk dey patches" (Rawick, Alabama and Indiana Narratives, vol. 6, 22). Patricia Klindienst notes that this agricultural legacy has not disappeared. In her contemporary study of the "Gardens of Two Gullah Elders" in St. Helena Island, South Carolina, she writes, "In their gardens [the enslaved] . . . kept alive a love for the land that even the dehumanizing experience of slavery could not expunge" (Klindienst 55).[5] This "love for the land" produced a tangible commitment to the self and nonhuman nature through agriculture. It helped African Americans use work to "achiev[e] a bodily knowledge of the natural world" (R. White 172) and express dedication to their own

survival. Doing so allowed the enslaved to experience ecological beauty in the midst of incredible burdens.

The treatment of the enslaved even before they became workers inculcated the dehumanization of African Americans through circumstances that blurred the lines between human and nonhuman animal life. Although some child slaves did not begin work until they were preadolescents, the dehumanizing experience of slavery often reinforced their eventual status as workers on the plantation by grouping enslaved children with domesticated animals. This treatment often thrust the enslaved into an unwelcome proximity with nonhuman nature and underscored that part of their ecological burden would be existing on the margins of the category of human. An FWP interviewer's record of an interview with George Womble, enslaved in Georgia, reads,

> The younger children were fed from a trough that was twenty feet in length. . . . All [the enslaved children] stood back until the master had finished stirring the food and then at a given signal they dashed to the trough where they began eating with their hands. Some even put their mouths in the trough and ate. There were times when the master's dogs and some of the pigs that ran round the yard all came to the trough to share these meals. Mr. Womble states that they were not permitted to strike any of these animals so as to drive them away and so they protected their faces from the tongues of the intruders by placing their hands on the sides of their faces as they ate. During the meal the master walked from one end of the trough to the other to see that all was as it should be. (Rawick, Georgia Narratives, vol. 4, part 4, 186–87).[6]

At the very moment they were trying to nourish themselves physically, children were met with the message that nonhuman animals and African Americans shared the same status. Whether they were trying to keep the domestic animals from stealing food from the children's mouths or resisting the idea that they should be fed in this manner, the children's attempt to shield themselves from contact with dog and pig tongues asserts the idea that they are different from nonhuman animals. The master's desire to reinforce the dehumanization of his future workers is seen in his pacing the area, making him readily available to police anyone who challenged things "as [they] should be." This equating of African American life and domestic animal life was a direct impediment to developing a healthy sense of ecological citizenship and continued throughout adulthood. In the slave markets, enslaved human beings "were treated more

like animals rather than humans" and "examined by the doctors and prospective buyers and later sold to the highest bidder the same as a horse or a mule" (Rawick, Georgia Narratives, vol. 4, part 4, 190). Commenting on the transport of slaves to the auction block, formerly enslaved Carolinian W. L. Bost pleads that "poor critters [i.e., slaves] nearly froze to death" "chained together [without] enough clothes on to keep a cat warm" with "ice balls hanging on to the bottom of [women's] dresses as they ran along [in bare feet], just like sheep in a pasture before they are sheared." Exasperation seeps from his concluding remarks: "The speculators always rode on horses and drove the poor niggers. When they get cold, they make them run till they are warm again. The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the niggers in the quarters just like droves of hogs. . . . Lord, Miss, them slaves look just like droves of turkeys running along in front of them horses" (Rawick, North Carolina Narratives, volume 11, part 1, 139–40). Bost's comparisons and Womble's testimony underscore that from the beginning to the end of a slave's life the message that African-descended people were somehow less human and more pejoratively "animal" was a pillar of enslavement ideology and practice. This approach subjected them to work conditions akin to and sometimes worse than conditions for beasts of burden. For those who supported or internalized this dehumanization, the ecological place for African Americans was firmly outside the category of human, and certainly even more distant from citizen.

Frustration over this dehumanizing treatment compelled many of the enslaved to run away, either temporarily or permanently. These runaways had to be equipped with the knowledge and will to survive on the outskirts of plantation life. An interviewer's record of Mrs. Celestia Avery, enslaved in Georgia, "related the occasion when her Uncle William was caught off the . . . plantation without a pass, and was whipped almost to death by the 'Pader Rollers.' He stole off to the depths of th[e] woods[;] here he built a cave large enough to live in. A few nights later he came back to the plantation unobserved and carried his wife and two children back to this cave where they lived until after freedom. When found years later his wife had given birth to two children. No one was ever able to find his hiding place and if he saw any one in the woods he would run like a lion" (Rawick, Georgia Narratives, volume 4, part 4, 24). In Avery's comments, associations between her uncle and a lion reify his humanity rather than circumscribe him to subhuman status. In an effort to honor the humanity and protect the safety of his family, Avery's uncle forges

ecological belonging, and outlasts slavery, in a maroon existence. Reflecting on Bendik-Keymer's definition of an ecological existence, little can be concluded about the health of the uncle's family's relationship to the natural world in which they made their home. However, it can be said that the ecological implications of their lives are clearly moral: Avery's uncle is able to escape an existence as a human worker in a social order that left him subject to extreme violence from other humans and begin a clandestine life as a human worker as part of a natural order. This natural order certainly may have had its share of violence that endangered maroons; however, Avery's uncle was willing to take that risk.

Living in the woods required people to feed and medicate themselves and, as in the previous example, possibly aid family members with knowledge of the natural world around them. In addition, slaves who remained on plantations lived during a time when herbal remedies were popular in many cultural groups. Survival within and outside the institution of enslavement involved the work of keeping the human body alive. Hence, the need to learn and use herbal remedies played a particularly significant role in the enslaved's expression of ecological belonging. The Federal Writers' Project gives numerous examples of the enslaved's use of herbal remedies for the work of self-care, procured in part from wild growing areas. Mrs. Celestia Avery explains, "We used everything for medicine that grew in the ground" (Rawick, Georgia Narratives, vol. 4, part 4, 26). As James Bolton explains,

> [T]hey was allus some garlic for ailments. Garlic was mostly to cure wums (worms). They roasted the garlic in the hot ashes and squez the juice outen it and made the chilluns take it. Sometimes they made poultices outen garlic for the pneumony. . . . We saved a heap of bark from wild cheery and poplar and black haw and slippery ellum trees and we dried out mullein leaves. They was all mixed an' brewed to make bitters. Whensomeever a nigger got sick, then bitters was good for, well ma'am, they was good for what ailed 'em! We tuk 'em for rheumatiz, for fever, an' for the misery in the stummick, and for most all sorts of sickness. Red oak bark tea was good for sore throat. (Rawick, Georgia Narratives, vol. 4, part 4, 94)

Bolton's elders and peers were able to treat a variety of illnesses by knowing the local plant world and relying on it repeatedly. Where local native plant life is used to improve human life, humans are particularly dependent on the health of the nonhuman natural world, especially close to

home. Bolton's community counteracted the ecological burden of an enslaved existence with the ecological beauty of meeting the needs of their ailing bodies with their own botanical knowledge.

This closeness to and daily dependence on nature also cultivated the sense of something Deborah Slicer calls "the body as bioregion"—the idea that human bodies are nature rather than separate from it. She explains, "The only bioregion that we can claim strict identity with is the body. . . . To be 'home' is first to inhabit one's own body. We are each, as body, a biological ecosystem as complex, efficient, and as fragile as the Brooks Range, the Everglades, a native prairie. . . . My worry is that this silence [on the part of environmentalists] reflects that the body is of no consequence, that our own corporeal nature is irrelevant to whatever environmentalists are calling 'Nature'" (Slicer 113–14). By examining the words of the enslaved, we can avoid the mistake that concerns Slicer. Both the conditions of enslavement and African American attitudes about what constituted nature reminded the enslaved of their own corporeal nature. Racist ideology reinforced the idea that black bodies were somehow insufficiently human, yet African Americans acknowledged the consequence of their corporeal nature by caring for their bioregions with other natural elements to be found around them. Given the poor rations they received and the conditions under which they toiled, the enslaved could not rely entirely on the institutions around them to maintain health or even, indeed, stay alive. Folk medicine allowed enslaved African Americans to become part of processes of nature. Using locally found medicines reflected not just a proximity to nature but also being part of the natural order. While their work conditions suggested they were subhumans relegated to life with other beasts, much of the voluntary work during enslavement discussed in these narratives reinforced the outlook that human beings are nature and need to have relationships with nonhuman nature.

Clara Davis's comments exemplify a lyrically worded sense of ecological beauty that some of the enslaved fashioned. Born in Alabama on a large plantation of five hundred acres and one hundred enslaved, Davis expresses her appreciation for rural life as she chides modernization. She underscores her preferences, saying,

> White folks, you can have your automobiles and paved streets an' electric lights. I don't want 'em. You can have de busses an' street cars an' hot pavements an high buildin' caze I ain't got no use for 'em no way. But I'll tell you

> what I does want. I wants my ole cotton bed an' de moonlight nights a shinin' through de willow trees an' de cool grass under my feets as I runned roun' ketchin' lightin' bugs. I wants to hear de sound of de hounds in de woods atter de 'possum, an' de smell of fresh mowed hay. I wants to feel de sway of de ol' wagon a-goin' down de red, dusty road an' listen to de wheels groanin' as dey rolls along. . . . I wants to see de dawn break over de black ridge an' de twilight settle . . . spreadin' a sort of orange hue over de place. I wants to walk de paths th'ew de woods an' see de rabbits an' watch de birds an' listen to frogs at night. (Rawick, Alabama, Narratives, vol. 1, 109–10)

The sensory-filled, idyllic description Davis artfully shares pinpoints her desire for distinctively rural human and nonhuman amenities. Her string of desires, linked as a series of "I wants," follows her distaste for human developments that impinge on her appreciation of nonhuman nature. Like many other enslaved African Americans, Davis developed these natural affinities without enjoying full status as an American citizen who would earn money for her work and travel where she pleased. Outside the protective bounds of national citizenship, Davis formulates a strong bond with the natural world forged under enslavement.

The Former Slave Narratives provide an invaluable oral history of the ecological experience of the enslaved, which also include evidence of African American performative traditions (e.g., woodland religious worship, agricultural songs, and animal tales[7]). This record provides a vibrant picture of imaginative responses to nature's many forms. They reveal the ways in which the enslaved rose above their degraded status in the social order to recognize ecological beauty and wonder in the natural order. However, there are also African Americans who acquired and exercised the privilege of literacy during and after their enslavement. Their imaginative, often self-authored, work further expands our thinking about nature, nation, enslavement, and citizenship.

The poetry of George Moses Horton is part of the earliest written evidence of African American ecological agency and vision. His work represents those enslaved who persisted in authoring their ecological insights and questions despite living in a period when scribal literacy for the enslaved was criminalized and penalized. His life and written art exemplify the problem of becoming invested in a land where one is not recognized fully as a member of the human community.

The ironic circumstances of the publication of Horton's first book of poems demonstrate the hostile world into which early African American

imaginative work was launched. Joseph Gales, a local official of the American Colonization Society (ACS), funded the publication of *The Hope of Liberty*,[8] a book that contained several of Horton's poems. The ACS sought to purge America of free African Americans by aiding their emigration to African colonies. The three-paragraph "Explanation" from Gales that appears before Horton's poems reveals the racist ideology pervading Horton's time. The layers of condescension within Gales's "philanthropic" gesture of publication begin with the title of his "authenticating document." The authenticity of African American imaginative work was immediately suspect and in need of an "Explanation" from a European American, because work such as Horton's brought into question the veracity of racist assumptions about black intellectual inferiority. It also brought out fears that a class of free blacks would grow in number and upset the racist foundation of power in the United States.

Gales stresses that Horton's poems are only being published in order to fund his exit from the country. Gales writes, "[Supporters] are solicitous that efforts at length be made to obtain by subscription, a sum sufficient for his emancipation, upon the condition of his going in the vessel which shall first afterwards sail for Liberia. It is his earnest and only wish to become a member of that Colony, to enjoy its privileges, and apply his industry and mental abilities to the promotion of its prospects and his own. It is upon these terms alone, that the efforts of those who befriend his views are intended to have the final effect" (Horton 1). The only terms under which it appears Horton would have received support for the publication of his poetry are his exile from the United States. In further support of racist ideology, Gales's "Explanation" quells assumptions about black criminality in his assurance that the poet "has been ever a faithful, honest and industrious slave," so dutiful and obedient to his enslavers that he only created poetry after his other work or during appropriate "intervals." Reinforcing the claim of intellectual superiority on the part of white supremacists, Gales asks for understanding that "pieces produced as these have been" may indeed have some "blemish" (Horton 1).[9] Appeal to Horton's audience depends on pity for Horton because he has "felt deeply and sensitively in this lowest possible condition of human nature" rather than on Horton's ability to provide a masterful and transformative aesthetic experience (Horton 1). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out in the essay "The Day When America Decided That Blacks Were of a Species That Could Create Literature," Horton was like other early enslaved

authors who tried to use writing "as a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity" (Gates 51). The imaginative work of African Americans such as Horton was a dangerous thing to undertake and had to be negotiated carefully, particularly if it did not support the ideology of racial hierarchy.

Had Horton been able to buy his freedom from money earned from book sales, he would have been a further threat: his presence would not be justified by the racist power structure, and his work would occur outside of enslavement's presumed paternalism. Hence, Horton's case is symbolic of early African Americans' ecological dilemma. Enslaved and quasi-free African Americans formulated connections to the human and nonhuman natural world knowing that they had little, if any, legal or social support in maintaining these connections. The enslaved were subject to sale and perpetual placelessness that could uproot them from a lifetime of work in a particular ecosystem. Furthermore, Horton could not publish his work alone. In making a partnership with Gales, he had to agree to give up his connection to the only place and nation he had ever known. To have his imaginative work rendered in print, Horton had to agree that proceeds from book sales would be used by Gales to purchase his freedom. He would be free, then, but only if he left the United States and sailed off to live in a country and on a continent he had never seen.

In Horton's life story, not only is African American imaginative work immediately suspect, but its publication also comes at a high and painful cost: its creator must leave home. Work, for affirmed members of the social order, is one articulation of social belonging: proof that one has an authorized place in a given society. But work for the enslaved was evidence of the "social death" that Orlando Patterson identified. Enslavement and criminalized "freedom" offered only the perpetual threat of placelessness and certainly did not encourage African Americans to root themselves in the American landscape and express creatively their relationships to the land.[10]

Despite this hostile environment, Horton's poems do reveal a powerful connection to the land, a connection so telling that it authorized ecological belonging in the absence of national kinship. In the excerpt from "The Southern Refugee" used as an epigraph to this chapter, Horton laments that separation from his "native home" would be akin to losing an Edenic paradise. To the long history of Eden-inspired recovery narrative[11] in America, Horton adds the voice of a slave authorizing his connection to

America. The image of his home as a beloved garden evokes the care and interaction between a human and the nonhuman natural world that could be found in the writing of nonenslaved authors. In fact, Joan Sherman notes that Horton's poetry parallels thematically the poetry of his North Carolinian, European American peers. Comparing Horton's themes with those found in an anthology called *Wood Notes*, Sherman explains that Horton and the anthology's authors all write about the idea that nonhuman nature is "analogous to man," the "beauties and wonders of the seasons," the "grandeur" of nature, and nature's ability to illuminate "morals [or] life's bright and dark sides" (Sherman, *Black Bard*, 37).

While it is noteworthy to recognize the similarities in the nature writing of Horton and his white peers, I would like to stress that Horton's combination of nature-writing themes and the direct expression of his dissatisfaction with slavery distinguish the ecocritical potential of his poetry. Horton's aesthetic brings together vitriolic antislavery pleas such as "On Liberty and Slavery," "The Slave's Complaint," and "Lines . . ." alongside a reflective voice fully aware of the nonhuman natural environment in poems such as "On Summer," "On Winter," and "On Evening and Morning." He establishes numerous themes to which he returns and refines throughout his long life of producing poetry. "On Liberty and Slavery" contrasts the "created bliss" of free life with the "toil" of slavery. Yet enslavement does not make him numb to the power and wonder of the natural world around him. Echoing the lives of the "vassals" who recur in his poems, Horton pays homage to the land that others own. But reaching beyond their voices, he simultaneously and consistently adds a critique of the system that enslaved him.

As a nature writer, Horton acknowledges the perspectives of humans and nonhumans alike; indeed, in several poems, their perspectives overlap. For example, he adopts the first-person voice to convey a sorrow-filled life of toil in "Death of an Old Carriage Horse." The concern over placelessness he expresses in "The Southern Refugee" and "A Slave's Reflections on the Eve before His Sale" can also be heard in "The Fate of an Innocent Dog," in which he warns,

> A creature may be fraught with grace,
> And suffer for the vile and base . . .
> By straggling off from home.

The blood of creatures oft is spilt,
Who die without a shade of guilt–
Look out or cease to roam–
Whilst up and down, the world he plays,
For pleasure, man, in danger strays . . .
Without a friend from home.
(Sherman, *Black Bard*, 107)

"Division of an Estate" was inspired by his own experience of being part of property to be divided, yet Horton describes the dogs, cattle, sheep, swine, and horses as just as disturbed by the "day of separation" as the enslaved, all suffering the fate of "tumbl[ing] on" the "right or left forever" (Sherman, *Black Bard*, 100–101). In these examples, Horton expresses his ecological belonging by taking up nonhuman animals as subjects and underscoring the parallels between his plight as a slave and their plight as domesticated animals.

At the same time, Horton's poetic voice articulates ecological belonging by reflecting on human-centered subject matter as well. He affirms humans as predators in nature in "The Woodman and Money Hunter" while he also admonishes humans to avoid "the chase for money." "On the Pleasures of College Life" celebrates education but also cautions that humans can never fully know nature. After extolling the strengths of geography, botany, zoology, and astronomy, he writes,

But nature never yet was half explored,
Though by philosopher and bard adored;
Astronomer and naturalist expire,
And languish that they could ascend no higher;
Expositors of words in every tongue,
Writers of prose and scribblers of song,
Would fail with all their mathematic powers,
And vainly study out their fleeting hours.
(Sherman, *Black Bard*, 109)

These lines support Horton's Christian perspective that theology is the "sweetest science," a perspective that one can also read in his references to "nature's God." Horton's poetry makes nature a theological emissary that can supersede the social order and make available divine affirmation of people with degraded status.

Like the FWP's formerly enslaved informants whose sense of ecological belonging was infringed upon by forced labor and disenfranchisement, Horton continuously references wonder about the natural order and frustration over the social order within the same voice. Horton and the FWP informants did not wait for America to authorize their national citizenship or their ecological belonging. They expressed their connection to American soil without this benefit. Their attitudes about work integrate critique of the social order and appreciation of the natural order. The ecological insight to be gained from listening to them suggests the need to recognize both the social and the natural order and to honor the human being as part of both systems.

The final author discussed in this chapter, Albery Whitman, was enslaved from his birth in 1851 until 1863. In summarizing his own experience of enslavement, he relates that he was "bred to the plow" and "amid the rugged hills along the banks of [the] Green River in Kentucky" he "enjoyed the inestimable blessings of cabin life and hard work." At the same time, he distinguishes himself as a person in "bondage" suffering under "the infamous laws of a savage despotism," stressing that he "was never a slave" (Whitman, *Rape of Florida*, 8). Though published after the end of slavery in the United States, his writings emphasize the lasting legacy of enslavement. He stands out as an author enthralled with nonhuman nature and keenly aware of the impact of social systems on ecological perception. He "saw in nature a book . . . written by a divine hand, containing knowledge of the utmost importance for [people] who wanted to live their lives under the most favorable circumstances" (Jackson 286).

Whitman's aesthetic stamp is as strong as his ethical voice. A variety of literary traditions–including romanticism, pastoralism, epic, and the Spenserian form–influenced his art. Like other African American authors, Whitman "adopted many of the ideas and genres of the white dominant culture in order to declare [himself] part of it" (Zafar 7), yet he is firmly committed to applying these influences to southern subject matters, including the lives of those of African descent. He writes, "A race which has given the world so much of its cheerfulness, and made it so much better by its songs and its prayers, should not despair in a land where the magnolia [*sic*] and cape jassemine [*sic*] reach the perfection of flower and perfume, and the mocking-bird, wild and free, sings through all the year" (*An Idyl of the South* 4). The idea that southern landscapes should be a comfort to the disenfranchised is a consistent theme in his work. While he calls for artists

to "sing the 'New Song' of the South" in "epic[s] of Emancipation," "farce-comed[ies] of Reconstruction," and "romance[s] of Agriculture," Whitman confronts the injustice of slavery and is fully committed to "America's *coming* colored man" (*Rape of Florida* 7). He calls for race pride in the face of degradation, scolding those without it. At the same time, limitations in his vision include a patriarchal-inflected masculinity that overshadows the lives of women, a valorization of the multiracial/mulatto character that supports colorism and stereotypical ideas about Africanity, and depictions of Native American life that come dangerously close to being sentimental and one-dimensional. Still, it is difficult to dismiss his powerful combination of literary skill, dedication to justice, and celebration of human connection to the natural world. Two of his poems in particular, *Rape of Florida* (first published in 1884, then republished in 1885 and 1890 under the title *Twasinta's Seminoles*) and *The Freedman's Triumphant Song* (1893), reveal how his matrix of work, nature, nation, and belonging honors portions of African American and Native American ecological history.

Rape of Florida (ROF) depicts "Nature" through the "struggles of a forest son," Atlassa (ROF 13, canto I, line 13), who lives in a contested land that has been under indigenous and Spanish control. The poem is devoted to events inspired by the series of wars occurring from 1817 to 1858 between the U.S. Army and Seminoles in Florida. The multicultural Seminoles–who included several indigenous groups, those of African-Indian descent, and African American runaways among their numbers–eventually lost their efforts to maintain exclusive territory within the United States. Most of Whitman's characters are fictional (exceptions include a brief appearance of Osceola, a Seminole war chief, and "Negro Abraham," a formerly enslaved runaway), yet his poem is openly sympathetic to the real situation of the Seminoles and runaway slaves who sought refuge in Seminole territory. Whitman's poem sides with Seminole attempts to maintain control over a portion of Florida or "Twasinta." He does this by addressing the following ecological burden: how will the Seminole community maintain a relationship with nonhuman nature in the face of what he describes as the hostile, land-hungry union of religion and tyranny that is the American government? By the poem's conclusion, we learn their only hope to experience ecological beauty is living in exile in Mexico.

The poem's moral center laments the failure of the United States to accept the Seminole community as part of Florida and to recognize the benefits that Seminoles have made to the natural order. Joan Sherman,

who describes Whitman's piece as parabolic, writes, "Action and characterization receive minimal attention from the poet, for this treacherous rape of Florida is parabolic. To Whitman it exemplifies the superiority of primeval Nature (Eden) over the world of Mammon, of fierce-spirited red and black braves [*sic*] over white men, and of 'love in the forest'–love of God and among natives [*sic*]–over the hatreds and hypocrisies in San Augustine" (*Invisible Poets* 122). The parabolic frame is suitable to the function of work in the poem as well. Whitman's poem supports the idea that this community's work authorized their right to stay in Twasinta with or without the acceptance of the American government. It gives a depiction of the work of an indigenous and mixed-race community as well as of a nation defining its borders and determining who counts as "citizen."

Many kinds of work appear in this long text: the "slavish toil" from which escaped slaves seek refuge; the "requited labor" of Seminole agrarian life; the work of nonhuman nature (e.g., the toil of bees [ROF 17], leaves [ROF 64], and seas [ROF 81]); and the war, "human hunting," and "perfidy" that result in the removal of the Seminole community. The struggle of the endangered Seminoles is another form of work; they must find space to exist. The poem presents the multicultural community's work as encouraging a sense of belonging to the nonhuman natural world, yet this work as unimportant in light of America's efforts to occupy and own Seminole land. Instead, this discounted work makes the Seminole community's disconnection from the designation "citizen" even more severe because of the lost opportunity to be included as skilled laborers whose work on the land can contribute to American cultural pride. The categories of belonging for the Seminole community in this poem never include citizen or patriot. In contrast, they are maroon, exile, or runaway, "because they had been excluded from the legal and moral frameworks that defined national citizenship" (Goldsby 17). Whitman authorizes Seminole and African American presence in America by stressing that their work and ethic of fairness are validated by the natural order even though they are discounted by the social order.

While the poem is firmly rooted in Spanish, U.S., and Mexican history, its epic scope confronts a common problem: societal conceptions of nation are sometimes hostile to the human desire for ecological belonging. His poem gives the moral upper hand to nonhuman nature, which recognizes the importance of all who work effectively as ecological stewards. This vision of ecological stewardship encompasses humans' relationships

to each other and to nonhuman nature. It valorizes the Seminole community as slave-free and morally fair, balanced with both cultivated land and uncultivated wilderness.

Whitman describes nature as having a language of its own that is readily accessible, even to those who do not benefit from the civic and ecological balance in the Seminole community. In giving nature speech, Whitman allows nature reason and the ability to teach. He writes,

> Oh! Does not Nature teach us primal bliss?
> Who has not felt her lessons in his youth?
> And having felt, who can forget forsooth!
> The voice of birds, the toil and hum of bees,
> And air all filled with sounds, sweet or uncouth,
> Dark heights, majestic woods and rolling seas
> Have been my teachers, and my teachers still be these!
> (ROF 17, Invocation, lines 172–80)

Note that this is one of many passages in the poem where Whitman's authorial voice becomes a direct part of the poem. Although Whitman takes on a subject from which he is historically and spatially removed, this commingling of his authorial, poetic voice with his personal history suggests he believes in the pervasiveness of nature's speech and reason. In the poem's preface he remarks, "I began to *try* sayings of poetry before I knew what writing was. Before I could write a letter, I was trying to scribble down what the birds and bees and cows were saying and what even the dumb rocks were *thinking*. Nature has ever had a speech for me, and in listening to her voice, lies my satisfaction" (ROF 10). In both his personal experience and his depiction of the Seminole community, Whitman proposes that nonhuman nature has a superior language for communication than humans and a superior ability to recognize the ecological value of marginalized human beings.[12] Since African Americans are among those at the bottom of the American system, their attachment to American land is incongruous with their status in the nation, yet nonhuman nature affirms the experience of the enslaved in the poem, while "Law s[its] by and utter[s] no complaint" (ROF 14, canto 1, line 90).

Following the invocation, the poem begins with the perspective of a runaway slave who, in search of refuge, finds a flourishing Seminole territory. Their agricultural work has been rewarded by nonhuman nature. "Tilled profusion," "wide-ranged farms begirt with fences," "cultivated

plot[s]," and "fields of bread" (ROF 15, canto 1, lines 109, 110, 111, 115) reveal that a healthy, fertile Florida has resulted from the work of the Seminole, and it exists alongside uncultivated spaces such as "wild meadows stretched in bloom-sweet sheen," "fruit-bearing woods," "unconquered shades," and "cypress forest[s]" (ROF 12–15, canto 1, lines 44, 98, 115, 143). Right after these images of cultivated and uncultivated plenty along with the "lowliest shed[s]" (ROF 15, canto 1, line 113) of Seminole land, the poetic voice poses rhetorical questions about whether the built environment (represented as "high-domed mosque[s] and "steepled cathedral[s]") are the only "shrines of patriotism" (ROF 15, canto 1, lines 118–21). Indeed, the "friend of Florida and man" (ROF 79, canto 3, line 468) is the clear hero of the poem.

The clear villain is a social order that will not respect the "justice" of "all ordaining Nature" (ROF 16, canto 1, line 132), which has given everyone somewhere to live and an intense love for that place. This social order manifests in "the man who blesses and the man who kills" (ROF 17, canto 1, line 158), who practices a wayward form of Christianity paired with tyranny driven by "avarice's pinch and strife" (ROF 16, canto 1, line 152). The moral center of *Rape of Florida* is a justice that exists in "Nature" before "man's existence": "all ordaining Nature gives / Somewhere to live, to every child she has," and Nature "induces" people to love "the spot whereon [they] live" (ROF 16, canto 1, lines 127–35). Also, the social order is critiqued in depiction of those with titles. "The world cares little whose grand sires were kings; / I'd rather be a squatter on the plains, / And Know that I possessed industry, pluck and brains" (ROF 31, canto 2, 16–18). Another way the social order is critiqued is through the problem of perfidy, which supports the "avarice" of "Priestcraft and Tyranny." Osceola, a mixed-race character from Whitman's poem *Not a Man, Yet a Man*, foreshadows the betrayal of Seminoles, appearing briefly in *Rape of Florida*. He is embittered about broken treaties with "the white man" and copes with "pent-up wrath that rankled in his breast" (ROF 21, canto 1, line 280). The lines "by heaven and earth and hell [Osceola] swore / To treat in council with the white man never more" (ROF 21, canto 1, lines 287–88) indict the societal order that will work against the Seminole as well.

In contrast, Whitman depicts work and nonhuman nature as ways to make real African American and indigenous ecological belonging. In the national narrative, they do not belong. They are part of "endangered"

communities that are seen as threats to the United States. Yet, the nonhuman natural world affirms this belonging to place. At several points in the poem, nonhuman nature consorts with or supports the experience of those who are racially marginalized. "Abraham, the old Maroon" assures Ewald that he will be able to deliver her message to Atlassa, saying, "The cypress and the desert pine can tell / How often I have traveled night and day" "in their shade" before he disappears into the "moon-lit forests great" (ROF 71–72, canto 3, lines 271, 272, 279). "Nature seemed to join" the "mournful singing" of a runaway slave (ROF 13, canto 1, line 58). The Seminoles gain advantage from an alert of "song and vigor" from "field and woodlawn" in their battle against advancing U.S. troops (ROF 56, canto 2, line 701).

By the poem's fourth and final canto, the Seminole community has lost its battle with the United States. They are in Mexico, where they are said to "toil and hope again" (ROF 89, canto 4, line 235). One consolation for this forced exile is the fact that they are not enslaved in America; in the end, the Seminole community "could not be enslaved [and] would not enslave" (ROF 79, canto 4, line 460). Ironically, in Mexico, they are finally free to live out the U.S. promise "of life, and liberty, and happiness" (ROF 95, canto 4, line 402). They are free to

> join with Sovran Labor's plows and spades
> And jocund axes in the wilderness,
> To dig and hew away primeval want's fortress.
> (ROF 95, canto 4, lines 403–5)

And as their work begins in this new nation, they also have the familiar support of nonhuman nature. Whitman writes,

> Who finds *this* country *now*, exulting finds
> That nature sounds the anthems of the free,–
> The boundless prairie swept by restless winds,
> Great forests shouting on tumultuously,
> Rivers that send their greetings to the sea,
> Peace-loving vales, where weed-brimmed waters run,
> Broad lakes, whose shade-fringed margins lisp their glee,
> Mountains, that prop their green heights in the sun,
> And herded slopes that winter never looks upon!
> (ROF 96, canto 4, lines 406–14)

In a poem concerned with the work of nation building and its toll on human communities, Whitman concludes with Seminoles hopeful about their lives in Mexico yet hungry to see Twasinta again.

Through an idealized vision of Seminole community, Whitman writes his own pastoral literature that yearns for a time when human systems will be as seemingly accepting as nonhuman nature. He calls the Seminoles the "citizens of God and Sovran earth" (ROF 22, canto 1, line 303) and champions the way in which they provided a moment, however brief, of synchronicity between the natural and social order for enslaved African American runaways. Of the Seminole, he writes,

> The poorest negro coming to their shore,
> To them was brother–their own flesh and blood,–
> They sought his wretched manhood to restore,–
> They found his hidings in the swampy wood,
> And brought him forth–in arms before him stood,– . . .
> They shot straight forward looks with flame imbued,
> Till in him manhood sprang, a noble birth,
> And warrior-armed he rose to all that manhood's worth.
> (ROF 22, canto 1, lines 298–306)

The runaway's rebirth comes courtesy of a world in which full humanity is affirmed through both ecological and societal belonging. Whitman's pastoral serves the purpose of reconciling desire for ecological belonging with acceptance in the governing human system that relegated one's relationship to the land. In Whitman's poems, the Seminoles lose their ability to govern what happens in any part of Florida. Yet Whitman uses his artistic voice to honor an interpretation of history that suggests that natural and social order can be united.

By the time Whitman authors "The Freedman's Triumphant Song," he and other African Americans have a unique opportunity to help shape their experience in being part of the United States. The occasion for his work is the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Conditions for people of African descent in the "white city" help in contextualizing what appears to be a radical departure from Whitman's celebration of a maroon community in *Rape of Florida* to his qualified endorsement of "Columbia" in "The Freedman's Triumphant Song." Controversy swirled around African American participation in the World's Fair and the designated Colored American Day. Numerous African Americans spoke out

against what they felt was their marginalized presence in the white city. Frederick Douglass notes his dissatisfaction at the "slender recognition [African Americans] have received from the management of the exposition" and his broader frustrations with the "National problem" (qtd. in Reed 193–94). Like his contemporary Ida B. Wells, who powerfully raised awareness about the horrors and pervasiveness of lynching, Douglass spoke to national conditions for African Americans. Douglass set forth, in particular, ways that the legacy of slavery had yielded racism, terror, and injustice, all keeping black progress at bay. In his speech on Colored American Day, he explains, "The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own Constitution" (Reed 194). Like Douglass, African Americans of different ideological stripes saw the exposition as a stage on which to demonstrate their Americanness and to call into question the idea and practice of America.

Douglass also notes in his speech, "Today the Negro is barred out of almost every reputable and decent employment" (Reed 194). Indeed, labor within the white city was not free of the racial injustices of the time. Some African Americans were able to secure employment, yet most were limited to menial jobs. In his study *All the World Is Here! The Black Presence at White City* (2000), Christopher Reed shares, "Notwithstanding the documented, indispensable role of the African slave laborer as a major factor in the growth of the American economy between the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the time of the fair stood as the time of the industrial laborer. And racism in the North had precluded the entry of African Americans into that economic sector" (61). The legacy of enslavement influenced the work experiences of African Americans at the fair, and Whitman used the subject of work to forward his own vision of America.

Read in 1893 at the Memorial Art Palace as part of the World's Columbian Exposition, "The Freedman's Triumphant Song" (FTS) was part of a pamphlet of two poems created for the exposition.[13] It hearkens to both the agrarian times of the "African slave laborer" and the industrial times of the would-be African American industrial worker. It conveys concern about the lack of recognition of black labor in both times. The poem honors African Americans faced with the increased presence of new immigrants vying for jobs and rhetoric of black expatriation as an answer to the "Negro problem." It sets forth the image of African Americans trying to secure their position and advancement as Americans just as there is

widespread speculation that America may be better off without them. All of these challenges exacerbated the old struggle to secure paid work.

Forthrightly, "The Freedman's Triumphant Song" suggests that black labor should be a point of pride in America's patriotic consciousness. The poem is fueled by the idea that America should support the reciprocity that marginalized groups have had with the nonhuman natural world by securing the marginalized's ability to thrive in the social order. Whitman insists that, through work (during enslavement and war), African Americans have earned a place in America; further, the natural world endorses African American national belonging. The poem celebrates the possibility that "Columbia" include blacks in its national representation to the world. Whitman presents an unabashed belief that America's empire can be the "pride of worlds" that "leads the van" (FTS 6, lines 236, 227); however, it must confront enslavement and properly acknowledge the contributions of African Americans (behavior modeled by nonhuman nature).

Although the poem stresses the "*now*" of postbellum America, the period of enslavement sets the stage for the poem's Jeremiadic direction. An early passage on slavery suggests what it meant to be a "bondsman" then: "Time was, when at his weary task, / He yearned for rest and feared to ask" (FTS 2, line 84). Taking comfort along the James River, the bondsman sings, prays, and cries. Next, the heavens open up and "grew still that God might hear"; the "bondman's faith then found its way," and a renewal of faith inspires "[his] heart to hope once more." Natural wonder signifies to the slave that there will be something more than this life ("music of the pines," "tree-walled cathedral," "glory where the sunlight shines," "freedom in the waterfall," and "awe of boughs and vines" [lines 95–100]); through all of the pain the slave still trusts God and finds a way to bless "the hand that held the smiting rod" (FTS 2–3, lines 84–103).

Nonhuman nature is characterized as recognizing and affirming this blessing. Natural elements (i.e., waters, mountains, forests, lusty cornfields, tall herds, and riplets of light) urge African Americans to "hold to [their] home" rather than leave their "native land" (FTS 5, lines 185–96). The connection to nonhuman nature similarly underlies Whitman's suggestion that "Columbia" not favor those "who just hailed from foreign coast" over African Americans. Although the poem "bid[s] welcome" to "noble guests" of the World's Fair (FTS 2, lines 46–48), it is hostile to immigrants who have recently made America home. Rather than the competition between U.S. forces and the Seminole community, presumed competition

between African Americans and European immigrants fuels this poem and mirrors the anti-immigrant sentiment of previously established European American populations at the time. The fear that African Americans' "struggle in for place" (FTS 2, line 73) may be ignored by America is echoed in anti-immigrant expression:

> [H]old we will, 'gainst all who boast
> *Our* flag, just hailed from foreign coast:
> To *such*–who never tilled a field
> To such, we cannot, *will not* yield.
> Our rights are not *conferred* but, *won*
> Through sweat and blood–in storm and sun,
> And here contending to the end
> We'll fight it out with foe or friend.
> (FTS 5, lines 197–204)

These lines relay the fear that the contributions of African Americans would be overlooked in favor of the work of European immigrants, many of whom would gradually be subsumed into a nation that privileged whiteness. Perhaps as powerful as his insistence on acknowledging and promoting African Americans' work in America's nation building is Whitman's use of anti-immigrant sentiment. As an author, Whitman does not forward a noncompetitive relationship between newer European immigrants and African Americans. Amplifying the contributions of African Americans, Whitman either ignores the indigenous or scapegoats immigrants. When empire is the ecological context, physical space and place in national narratives are contested. Although the poem celebrates Columbia's opportunity to include African Americans in its narrative of empire, it also suggests that even if Columbia will not acknowledge African Americans' labor in making the United States, then nonhuman nature will continue to do so.

Direct reference to the multiple nation-building tasks accomplished by the enslaved appears throughout the poem, especially after "freedom c[o]me[s]" in line 104 and former bondsmen fight in the Civil War. War service leads to the martial heroism of blacks who fought with Grant and Sheridan. After the war is over

> The Negro lifts his manly brow
> To God, and joins the glorious *now!*
> . . .

> [W]ith the tiller of the soil,
> And very honest son of toil,
> With eager stride, and hand in hand,
> He joins to bless his native land.
> (FTS 4, lines 136–37, 142–45)

Black soldiers' work in earlier battles (e.g., Bunker Hill and Valley Forge) is celebrated as well. The poem argues that there can be a "simple justice" that acknowledges that blacks "shared the victory" of these battles and should not only wear the scars but the honor of their participation in these nation-forging sites (FTS 2, lines 79–83).

With a long history of agricultural and martial toil, "children of the ebon hue" can sing the "songs of praise and love" for America. The poem discourages the ideas that "Saxons" have exclusive ownership of the country, stressing that "dark brothers rise *with* thee." "We" and "our" are repeated pronouns of the poem; "our" is used to stress combined racial ownership of the natural and built resources of the nation. These resources are related to agricultural work or they are the tools by which to transform that work (e.g., mill). Whitman advocates the transformation of natural resources through work, in order to suggest that African Americans be present "in all the walks of enterprise" to "build the nation's wealth and power." Whitman makes the mistake of thinking that the nation's resources would be inexhaustible and the goal of building "wealth and power" would always be in sync with the natural order. He suggests "irrigation crown with green / The thirsty desert's arid scene" and "drainage lay our last swamp bare / Before the hopeful plowman's share" (FTS 2, lines 58–61). This unchecked development and agricultural mandate are suggested so that "our glorious nation [can] stand alone"; however, the ecological faultiness of advocating even "nobly done" human development without regard to sustainability (or the well-being of other nations) is clear.

Central to Whitman's long and detailed call for ethical and celebratory inclusion of African Americans in both the history and continuing development of the nation is the concept that underlies all his work: it is senseless to talk about people's relationship to the land without acknowledging the human systems that shape these relationships. In his effort, Whitman wrestles with ecological and national belonging, human biodiversity, empire, work (including military service), the voice of nonhuman nature, and their multiple connections. No matter how welcoming nonhu-

man nature appears to be (and how perceptive it is in understanding the contributions of the downtrodden), attachments to place and the capacity for ecological agency are dependent on the roles afforded to people by human systems.

Whitman retains his celebration of work, marginalized human communities, and their connection to nonhuman nature over the course of dramatically divergent poetic voices: the anti-imperialistic vitriol of *Rape of Florida* and the empire-friendly patriotism of "The Freedman's Triumphant Song." The poems appear to be irreconcilable in their divergent attitudes about conquest, yet over the course of both, Whitman maintains the idea that freedom is conditioned by both the natural and social orders. His Romantic disposition to describe nonhuman nature in a benevolent, luxuriant, and fertile manner may certainly strike the contemporary reader as out of place in a recent past and present world of polluted, postindustrial locations, yet Whitman is astute in his verdant descriptions of human attachment to nonhuman life amid terrible oppression.

Conclusion

The results of omitting work from America's ecological narratives have been serious for African Americans. Until recently, this omission has left African Americans with a limited acknowledgment of the realities of enslaved life and the misperception that the enslaved were ecologically both mute and moot. The authors and oral history informants in this chapter are the green thinkers of the past who expand our notions of American environmentalism in ways that include work. Editor of *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*, Michael P. Branch invites readers to "a corrective thought experiment . . . try[ing] to imagine the American nature writing tradition slowly building toward Thoreau, rather than spontaneously issuing from him" (xvi). All of the enslaved nature writers and nature actors in this chapter, the Former Slave Narrators, George Moses Horton, and Albery Whitman, help us extend this corrective exercise to Thoreau's predecessors and contemporaries who experienced enslavement.

Like Thoreau, African American authors brought ideas about work to their experience of the human and nonhuman natural world. "As a [European-American] New Englander, Thoreau is the inheritor of a powerful imperative to find a 'calling' and then work in it for the glory of

God and the good of the human community. Thoreau cannot escape this inheritance" (Bromell 216–17). Unlike Thoreau–who was, nevertheless, a significant contributor to American abolitionist discourse–the authors I discuss here inherit the struggle to make sense of work before and after being enslaved themselves. On the margins of national belonging, they use work to signify their sense of belonging as ecological actors with a fragile, or nonexistent, hold on national citizenship. Thoreau wrote freely with no question about his citizenship. These African American authors represent a parallel experience to Thoreau's in American ecological thought. Their perspectives result in a tradition that insists on acknowledging the natural and social orders. Their imaginative traditions press for radical change in the social order so that it may affirm relationships that nonhuman nature are imagined to have recorded. This tradition acknowledges that African American belonging has been affirmed in the natural order in ways that the social order has yet to see. It also suggests that proper stewardship of the land may never emerge from a social order that does not properly honor all of its workers.

Now, at a time of heightened ecological awareness and activism, will work be something that allows African Americans to improve their connections to the natural and social orders? Will it advance a sense of national belonging (both internally and externally acknowledged), or will it rehearse the disconnections of the past?

The green jobs movement is one way these questions are addressed. Through it, the legacy of these enslaved workers is being continued, for the movement too seeks to reconcile the social order and natural order through the lens of work. This endeavor has gained national attention but remains unfinished. Recently the Dream Reborn conference signaled a bold, new age in the green jobs movement. Sponsored by the organization Green for All, the conference commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by uniting environmental and economic concerns, particularly for groups that have been underrepresented in mainstream environmentalism. Held in Memphis, Tennessee (April 4–6, 2008), its focus on green jobs sought to balance the needs of economically and ecologically disenfranchised communities without replicating the environmental excesses of a pollution-based economy. Van Jones, founder of the Ella Baker Center and cofounder of Green for All, expressed post-event glee, writing in a blog,

> The "Dream Reborn" conference was the first "green" summit to honor MLK and explicitly link his vision of justice to the emerging green economy. . . . For years now, conventional wisdom has held that no "green" conference could attract people of color or low-income people. It was always assumed that attendance at such summits would always be 90 percent white and overwhelmingly affluent. Not this time. More than 70 percent of the 1,200 attendees were people of color. And more than half of all attendees were of modest means; as a result, they qualified for some level of "scholarship" support to attend the three-day event. . . . I have never experienced the kind of energy I felt throughout the convening. Good reason, apparently. Civil rights veterans in attendance were openly weeping; many said that they themselves had experienced nothing like it since the 1960s. Something powerful shifted on April Fourth. (Jones, "Something Beautiful Happened")

Some of these changes include shifts to people of color as catalysts for ecological progress, work as a site of ecological activism, and ecological art inclusive of African American traditions. Jones notes, "From the main stage, we heard drums, prayers, choirs, poetry, and speeches that sounded more like passionate 'civil rights' sermons. From the audience, we heard cheers, chants, shouts and–sometimes–sobs" (Jones, "Something Beautiful Happened"). The "drums, prayers, choirs . . . [and sermonic sounding] speeches" in Jones's comments stress that sonic and oral traditions remain a part of the way people of color express their connection to nature. In the next chapter, neo–slavery poetry in the twenty-first century signals that African Americans will continue to use the written word as well.

TWO

York, Harriet, and George

Writing Ecological Ancestors

> If human beings, over time, when free to perform or not perform a given act, in fact invariably perform it, it is safe to assume that they *need* to perform it. . . . Ancestor worship is not alone the exotic preoccupation of quaint people mired in superstition in some remote corner of the world. Larger-than-life evidence of its industrialized-world variants can be seen in virtually every public park in America. . . . Obviously Americans, like all other people, *need* to worship their ancestors, either privately before cracked sepia photographs of stiff unsmiling long-dead kin or publicly at shrines like Mount Vernon, George Washington's home on the shore of Virginia's Potomac River.
>
> Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000)

> [The conservation] movement [is] accustomed to extraordinary leadership. The pantheon is awesome: the legendary elders John Muir and Gifford Pinchot; Bob Marshall, the wilderness maker; Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, who turned science into ethics; the majestic troublemakers, from Rosalie Edge to David Brower; the policymakers, from Teddy Roosevelt to Stewart and Morris Udall. These and hundreds of others have left their *individual* marks on history. Because of each of them, something changed.
>
> G. Jon Roush, *Voices from the Environmental Movement: Perspectives for a New Era* (quoted in Snow [1992])

Call: People-ing the Ecological Past

Although author and activist Randall Robinson has decided now to "quit America"[1] and live in St. Kitts, he details ideas about improving the relationship between African Americans and America in his book *The Debt:*

What America Owes to Blacks. One idea is to increase public acknowledgment of African American ancestors who have helped build the nation. His statement about the idea of ancestor worship may be discomforting for those who consider themselves too intellectually sophisticated and technologically advanced for such notions. However, Robinson suggests industrialization and its aftermath have not removed what he feels is a basic human need: the activity of identifying and memorializing the accomplishments of people who have preceded us. He notes that this activity is varied and pervasive. From his vantage point, Robinson sees ancestor acknowledgment as a key activity in shaping collective identity. His lament is that tributes to African American ancestors are neither a significantly visible part of the capital's landscape nor a voice within the collective narratives that encompass the nation's consciousness.[2]

In an example that supports Robinson's ideas about the need to venerate our predecessors, G. Jon Roush names (in the epigraph) several European Americans who foreground the conservation movement in the United States. Indeed, Roush's language, particularly the use of amplifiers such as "extraordinary," "pantheon," "awesome," "legendary," and "majestic," strikes an accord with the physical expanse and ecological variety of the United States itself. While he stresses the "*individual*" (italics in original) accomplishments of his exalted pantheon, he also marks them as important to a collective aim: conservation. Implicit in his praise is the notion that awareness of these figures can embolden and energize contemporary activists and everyday people alike.

Roush is not alone in his praise of European Americans involved in the conservation movement. In *National Leaders of American Conservation*, Richard H. Stroud writes, "From the start, the conservation movement attracted men and women who symbolized the social conscience of America. . . . They were the founders of a movement that has been one of the most glorious and most productive manifestations of our democratic republic" (17). For Roush and Stroud, these European Americans are an essential part of appreciating and developing environmental activism in the United States; they serve as ancestors who have "claimed Earth" (Madhubuti ii) and inspired a new generation to continue their work.

Yet the lack of racial diversity apparent in the history and present accounts of American conservation challenges Stroud's and Roush's totalizing claims about the movement's exemplary democratic character and social conscience. In the same collection of scholarly essays in which Roush's

work appears, Charles Jordan and Donald Snow write, "Most conservation leaders across the United States readily admit that their organizations hold little appeal to people of color. . . . The history of the conservation-environmental movement, coupled with the fundamental philosophy of most mainstream environmental groups, offers important clues to the lack of involvement by nonwhite constituencies. . . . The roots of exclusion in the American conservation-environmental movement reach back to the overt racism prevalent at the turn of the century; they remain watered today through the well-worn habits of largely unconscious organizational behavior" (Jordan and Snow 71, 99). The absence of racial signifiers in Roush's and Stroud's histories suggests that race is not an important concern for conservation, making it a "universal," culturally neutral realm open for people of any racial/cultural background. Jordan and Snow's work, however, provides a counterpoint that signals, in a similar fashion to Robinson, that the absence of a multicultural pantheon of ancestors may indeed point to undemocratic elements of America's past.

Critics of environmentalism's racism paint a picture quite different from the culturally neutral record of Roush and Stroud: Jordan and Snow claim that the history of conservation in the United States is inseparable from the concurrent history of racism and exclusion. While conservation in the United States includes impressive accomplishments by European Americans that, theoretically, all may enjoy–such as the national parks–its history is also beleaguered by agendas, attitudes, and actions that discourage multicultural identification with environmental issues. Despite the democratic claims of its scribes, the mainstream conservation-environmental movement has an exclusionary, monocultural legacy that does not represent the broad-based constituencies needed to address the urgent ecological issues that the nation and the world confront. While Robinson laments the lack of memorials to African Americans in the nation's capital, a similar aspect of America's connection to the past goes unacknowledged as well: the ecological artistic-historic record of African Americans and other people of color.

The previous chapter demonstrated the ways the words of enslaved African Americans serve as a way to fill this void. Their oral history and creative writing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries help people in the present perceive the ecological experience and insight of the enslaved. However, contemporary African American authors have been preoccupied with the lives of the enslaved as well, with the neo–slave

narrative being the dominant genre in this literary tradition. Part of a tradition rooted in an antebellum abolitionist context, "narratives of slavery [now] constitute their own genre within African American literature—one that reflects on not only the history of slavery but also its persistent legacy in the present" (Spaulding 1).

Frank X Walker, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Marilyn Nelson, the three primary authors in this chapter, offer an opportunity to acknowledge neo–slave poetry in this wing of African American literature. Through individual subjects with extraordinary lives, these poets paint collective portraits that echo patterns in the larger body of neo–slave literature. Ashraf Rushdy, in his book *Neo–Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, writes, "The Neo–slave narratives contest [the] premise of individualism and challenge the singular voice in which it is articulated. . . . These novelists dwell more on the communal subject positions of the antebellum slave narrators" (229). The poets I discuss achieve similar ends. Although they focus on the lives of individuals with exceptional experiences and achievements, they do so to assemble a collective image, formed from both history and imagination. This emphasis on collective experience in neo–slave literature, even if told through a study of an individual, mirrors changes in the nature-writing genre. In a multicultural collection of essays about ecology titled *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*, Alison Deming and Lauret Savoy note, "Many of the early luminaries of [nature writing] wrote about solitary explorations of pristine nature from a poetic, philosophical, or scientific perspective. . . . Contemporary nature writing has moved beyond narratives of solitary encounter in the wild to explore how people and cultures have been shaped by and have shaped the land. It bears witness to the wounded relationship between people and the Creation and explores how literature might have political agency in reshaping that legacy" (6). The neo–slave literature here provides a combination of individual and collective portraits that illuminates the communal land relationships to which Deming and Savoy speak. In doing so, these authors offer specific examples of communal traditions of ecological agency.

I define "ecological agency" as *the successful negotiation of the human and nonhuman systems that determine survival.* Rather than suggesting with a term such as "mastery" that human beings can somehow have ultimate control over nature, I stress the interdependence of human and nonhuman worlds with the term "agency" and highlight the way the historical figures here

face constant threats to their ability to be proactive participants in the natural and social order. Invigorated by research and creativity, Walker's, Nelson's, and Lansana's depictions detail how three historical figures manage to express ecological agency in the midst of numerous challenges, most notably enslavement and, for two figures, subsequent institutional racism.

Frank X Walker's *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York* (2004) and *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York* (2008) re-create the life of York, the enslaved body servant of William Clark. Walker's work suggests that York's participation in the Lewis and Clark expedition provides a platform for personal enrichment through encounter with various species and human cultures that yields a self-discovery that transcends York's near lifelong enslavement.[3] Lansana's *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems* (2004) offers a multivocal investigation of the psychological, spiritual, and physical rigors of an enslaved community invited to pursue geographic liberation. Nelson's *Carver: A Life in Poems* (2001) posits the cultural and technical vision necessary for George Washington Carver to forge one of the most productive and unique careers in modern science. The poets express each historical figure's ecological agency within a larger discussion of African American culture. Neo–slave poetry results, in which York, Tubman, and Carver epitomize traditions of ecological agency and become iconic representations of this agency for future generations.

Along with an intimate knowledge of nonhuman nature, the historical African Americans here had a firsthand understanding of the domination of human by human. Clearly their accomplishments differ from those of the European American ancestors/elders of the environmental movement. "Unlike the 'lords of the land,' slavery's descendants never had the option of creating a culture based on property ownership, accumulation, and exploitation" (Kelley 184). Typical goals of conservation such as governmental/public land stewardship and habitat preservation were outside the purview of people who had to fight to own their own bodies. Nevertheless, their achievements as ecological agents anchor our understanding of the American past in a much wider sea of knowledge and vision. The neo–slave poetry about their lives highlights their ecological import and makes an ecocritical reading of them possible. These poems inhabit the space between fiction and history. By creatively interpreting the life of an African American who experienced enslavement, each poet directs readers to one of the "hundreds of others" (Snow 18) whose lives warrant

inclusion in the nation's memory and our understanding of ecological agency and ancestry.

This is a call to analyze literary monuments that illuminate how the lives of those among people at the bottom of human hierarchies can help us better understand varieties of ecological agency. This is a call to observe how individuals with exceptional lives can tell a community's story. This is a call to examine how contemporary neo–slave poetry peoples the American ecological past by locating African Americans who can serve the role of ecological ancestors.

Response: From Enslavement to Ecological Agency

As a founding member of the Affrilachian Poets, Frank X Walker writes literature that counteracts the culturally homogeneous image of the central Appalachian region, in particular his birthplace of Kentucky. In *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York* (BD) and *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York* (WWC), he debunks a culturally uniform picture of the ecological history of the United States and one of its defining journeys: the Meriwether Lewis and William Clark expedition. To prepare to write *Buffalo Dance*, Walker spent six months reading books about the expedition, watching documentaries, traveling to the American West, reading slave narratives, and corresponding with friends of his in the area of the Lewis and Clark expedition. His writing process included immersing himself in York-related material just before going to sleep in the hopes that "York would wake him up" (F. Walker, interview). For *When Winter Come*, Walker supplemented his previous research strategies with "visits to the Nez Perce reservation," information found in the archives at the Nez Perce National Historical Park Research Center, "transcribed oral history," and meals with descendants of York. He explains the book's purpose as "valid[ating] the voices of enslaved African-American and Native peoples during a time in American history when their points of view were considered invalid" and "fill[ing] a gap in the collective works about the Lewis and Clark expedition and its other important but often overlooked figures" (WWC, introduction). This wealth of research is combined with his authorial identity as an artist who serves as a gateway for the lives of the historical people he has studied. He comments, "I pray my own feeling [*sic*] and beliefs don't get in the way of . . . the individual voices assembled here, which must speak their own truths" (WWC 115). Although York "participated in all of the expedition's

hardships and dangers; performed the same duties as [everyone else on the trip and more]; risked his life during a violent storm to search for Clark; and proved a valuable asset in [interacting with] a number of Native American tribes [they] encountered" (Holmberg 152), his depictions in written record are awash in myths that belittle or exalt him. Walker sought to strike some middle ground in this mythology and depict York as a person capable of the full range of human emotions who was both humorous and accessible (F. Walker, interview). Because Walker writes in the voice not only of York but also other people in York's life, readers can better appreciate York as an enslaved ecological agent who takes an extraordinary journey that allows his communal sense of self to expand as he travels west.

Aspects of environmentalism identify the dangers in taking a solely anthropocentrist approach to nature. At the same time, human-to-human contact during the Lewis and Clark expedition that Walker depicts is illustrative of the benefits of highlighting human interpretations of nature's variety. Native American responses to York and the human biodiversity he represented and, in turn, York's response to Native American people—including his relationship to Sacagewea—are a key part of Walker's treatment of York's ecological legacy, accounting for a significant portion of both books. The reciprocal affirmation of human culture in the texts offers a dialogue that countered racist ideologies of the time.

While African American and Native American relations in early America were far from uniform, York's experience among several Native American tribes along the expedition revealed a positive impression of his blackness.[4] Robert Betts writes, "To those Indians who had never seen a black person, York was a remarkable phenomenon, 'big medicine' to be viewed with astonishment and awe, thereby enhancing the prestige of these white strangers" (4), and more specifically, "[York] proved to be instrumental in keeping the Shoshonis from departing with the horses needed for the expedition to cross the Rockies" (147). Because of these Native American responses to the human biodiversity he represented, York would enjoy a break from the racist interpretation of "blackness" as a sign of inferiority and ugliness. The poem "Wasicum Sapa" (a Sioux term for "black man") details an incident in which a Hidasta chief tried to rub off what he thought might be a disguise of York's true appearance. York invites him to touch his "wooly head" and, "satisfied that I was not a black white man / [the chief] looked deep into [York's] eyes / an stared at

his own reflection" (F. Walker, BD, 16). This moment of recognized human biodiversity yields interpersonal communion rather than racist othering. Along the journey, male expedition members had sexual relations with Native American women. "No Offense" conveys jealousy from "Capt. Clark" over the Native American interest in York's striking physical features, which were so highly regarded that some Native American men invited York to impregnate their wives. Instead of racist arguments that use human biodiversity to support the concept of monogenesis, Native American recognition of human differences in Walker's poetry is rooted in an appreciation of the geographic and cultural history of humankind; these views of human biodiversity are not in conflict with contemporary biological evidence of human genetic commonality.

In *When Winter Come*, Walker pays homage to the relationship between York and the daughter of Chief Red Grizzly in several poems in the voice of his "Nez Perce wife." These poems speak lovingly of York's personality and appearance and express outrage over his enslavement. "Nomenclature" contrasts the negative responses from European Americans to York's "big nose an wooly hair" that suggested that "the closer to black a person is / the more mule he be" to the responses of the "Indian world" that felt York's "blackness / is a thing to be worshipped / [his] nose a sign of power." Walker allows York to signify on his master's opinions of Native Americans, remarking, "Capt. Clark call these beautiful / an kind peoples 'ignorant savages.' But it don't take a edjacated man / to guess what they think a his thin nose an pale face" (BD 36). The first poem in *Buffalo Dance* memorializes the fact that York's nickname of "Big Medicine" came from Arikara and Mandan communities who thought his "tobacco skin" and "wooly head" made him akin to a buffalo "who walk like man" (BD 1). This association with nonhuman animality is a compliment rather than an insult. In a similar vein, "Common Ground" inhabits the voice of Sacagewea, who is imagined to have said, "when he look and smile at me / then hold out a night sky for hands / he make me feel safe and warm" (WWC 40). The contours of Native Americans' positive readings of York's physicality and personality emphasize that ecology includes how people interpret human biodiversity and treat others accordingly as much as it does how humans treat plants and nonhuman animals. When this life-affirming interpretation occurs, people experience ecological beauty.

Walker imagines York's response to Native American culture throughout several poems. He lauds the superior tracking, animal calling, and

hunting skills of Indians in "Ornithologists," saying, "They know the calls an movements / a birds an animals / so much so, they can mock anything / in the woods, even deer / an them don't hardly speak" (BD 33). In "Spirit Mound," Walker quotes a portion of Clark's journal, which accuses York of being "fat and unaccustomed to walk as fast as [Clark] went" (BD 15) to introduce a rebuttal, in the voice of York, which reveals appreciation of Native American religious landmarks. Part of the poem reads,

> I didn't want to go no place
> so sacred even the Indians afraid to step,
> so I pretends to be more tired than I was.
>
> This piece of land so full a spirits
> I felt little hairs praising on the back a my neck
> but Capt. Clark don't seem to understand
> what be sacred to others any more
> than he see the difference
> tween me ana pack mule.
> (BD 15)

Clark's inability "to understand" and respect indigenous religions is compared with his inability to see York as anything more than a beast of burden. On the other hand, York is ready to assign religious significance to the natural world as he does in "God's House." Walker suggests that York says,

> Now, I ain't what you would call
> a scripture quoter,
> but the first time
> I seen the water fall at M'soura,
> felt a herd a buffalo stampede
> an looked down from top
> a Rock Mountains,
> it was like church.
> (BD 5)

The waterfall, buffalo, and mountains that York sees compel him to think of the natural world as the dwelling of God rather than a human-made sanctuary; disassociating himself with being a "scripture quoter," he finds spiritual comfort in a text without script.

York's perception of indigenous religions reinforces the idea that the natural world is the locus of the spiritual. "Without Bibles" is inspired by sweat-lodge rituals in which Indians ask for "blessings for they family, yours / they enemy, the land, the water, plants / an all the animals them share the earth with." Taking stock of the ritual and the misreading of the ritual by "the captains" as simply "bathing," York concludes that even "a blind man can see God / in everything the red man do" (WWC 19). York recognizes that the ecological agency in the Native American communities he encounters includes both material and spiritual knowledge. Walker suggests York's African cultural heritage has an analogous view of ecological agency. The poetry depicts a York who matures by drawing parallels between the cultures.

A broader combination of Native American and African American culture emerges in several poems. Walker makes associations among Native American, African, and African American cultures in recognition of similarities in culinary approaches ("Prosperity" and "Pastry Chef"), storytelling traditions ("Ananse," "Ananse Returns"), and epistemology ("Concentric"). "Homecoming" also catalogs other similarities, including village life, medicine men, people being "married to the earth" and "living off the land," dancing, masking, drumming, and ancestor worship. The poem suggests that York's father shares features of "ol' Africa" with York "so [he] would recognize home / when he see it" (WWC 5). Through these similarities readers experience the simultaneous expansion of York's sense of self as he travels westward and the affirmation of his African and African American heritage.

Over the course of the journey, Walker's depiction of York fuses his experiences with various cultures and yields a multicultural symbolic language that helps York cope with enslavement. For instance, this language extends to the practice of religious syncretism in the titles and imagery of three different "Vision Quest" poems. In the poems, York is an African American man engaged in the Native American rite of passage of spiritual maturation through physical journey. An old woman is the recurring spirit that foretells collective freedom.

The first poem, simply titled "Vision Quest," opens with a translation of a Teton Sioux song that includes the image of a hooting owl and calling crow. In the midst of a dream, York envisions an old woman offering him "a gift a tobacco tied to an eagle feather"; he puffs the "sacred pipe," rolls

around in "high grass," and transforms into a buffalo listening to the old woman singing. Walker writes,

> When she stopped her song she took a long pull a water
> an spit in the four directions an bade me look behind me.
> Old York, his Rose, my wife an all the slaves I knowed
> back in Virginy an Kentucke was rolling 'roud on the ground
> turning themselves into a small herd.
>
> When I turned back to where the old woman was sitting
> she was holding a bowl a water an bade me look into it.
> All I saw was her smiling face an a giant Crow
> staring back at me.
>
> Then as a strong wind came an carried me off
> I hollas back to the herd an say
> "One day I will return an bring all a you wings."
> (BD 39)

This first installment in a series of visions animates York, who desires to free his enslaved family members. In "Vision Quest II," York's spiritual rite of passage embodies an integration of Native American spirituality and African American biblical iconography that positions him as a prophet who is able to prophesy slave revolts such as Nat Turner's uprising at Harper's Ferry; dreaming, this time, gives him an out-of-body experience that supplies the vision of "a storm cloud / heading east like a runaway bull / lighting itself up as it go." He remarks that "when I make to stare at it / it put me in mind ova buffalo Jesus, wooly, / angry, an full a the revelations" (BD 41). This imagery recounts the biblical book of Revelation in which a messiah with "hair like wool" fights the devil in a final apocalyptic battle of good and evil.

The third "Vision Quest" poem imagines that York is saved from being buried in a hole "surrounded by a herd a wooly-headed buffalo" by an eagle that saves him by "plucking [him] out of the river . . . carry[ing] [him] away, dancing like a fish" (WWC 106). Walker conveys that one of the benefits of the expedition was the introduction of York to a liberating vocabulary of symbols and dream interpretation. Readers are invited to imagine that on the journey York enacted this vocabulary rooted in the nonhuman natural world and cathartic human-to-human experience. This ecological agency consequently gave York temporary relief from racist

interpretations of human biodiversity. Focusing on human-to-human contact on the expedition, Walker's poems "represent and endorse forms of intersubjective communication in which rugged and autonomous individualism is rendered subject and reactionary" (Rushdy 232). Walker's York, in other words, challenges the dominant culture's individualistic notion of manhood, especially in his conceptual alliance with other people of color and his shared belief in the spiritual power of nonhuman nature.

This collective sense of self is further developed by Walker's contrast of the doctoring styles of Lewis and York. "Real Medicine" hearkens to African herbalist traditions by including the proverb, "He who does not know a medicine defecates on it" (WWC 56). In "Medicine Men," Lewis's "doctoring" produces violent, if successful, reactions in many of the expedition members; however, York is also called on to "doctor" as well. In York's voice, Walker relays,

> It was me that was called to attend to Sgt. Floyd
> before he died an Sacagawea the last moon
> before her child come.
> Capt. Clark must have let on
> that I picked up a thing or two 'bout roots an wild grasses
> from Old York an his Rose.
> (BD 13)

Far from being merely a slave along to "cook an carry," York was an herbalist who brought with him the botanical knowledge that he learned from his parents ("Old York" and "Rose").[5] He applied this knowledge to soothe Sergeant Floyd on his deathbed and to aid Sacagawea while she was in labor.

Recent historiography about African American culture stresses that York's personal knowledge as an herbalist was common among enslaved African Americans.[6] Sharla Fett, in *Working Cures: Health, Healing, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, notes that "the sheer volume of herbs listed in the vernacular by African American elders suggests a detailed knowledge of wild-growing medicines, even from the distance of several decades" (73). Herbert Covey, in *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-Herbal Treatments*, makes an effort to inventory plants and assess their medicinal efficacy, but he also explains how herbal medicine had other benefits:

> African-American slave reliance on their own herb doctors, folk practitioners, grannies, and other African Americans was a form of empowerment and means of exercising control over their lives. Many slaves trusted these remedies and the African Americans that delivered them, so possible results from all of this would have been a sense of self-determination and an enhanced African American community. (123)

Walker's poem suggests York took pride in the herbal knowledge he learned from his parents while he applied this "sophisticated body of knowledge" (Fett 74) to the healing of expedition members. As "Big Medicine," York brought a facet of African American ecological engagement along with him in the journey west. Further, Walker's poems do not merely give York individual credit for this knowledge; they evoke his family's training and, hence, point to a long tradition of African American herbalism.

Walker envisions that it is this tie to family that drives York's decision not to run away from Clark; this decision resists the "natal alienation" (Patterson 6) of enslavement by insisting on familial connections desired by the enslaved. Even though, in his Rose's estimation, he is a man who "really only love the forest," York is depicted as saying, "I never run 'cause alla my family / still belong to Capt. Clark," in the poem "Homing Signals" (WWC 91). This love for family, in particular his enslaved wife, drives a wedge between York and Clark, who is befuddled about "why [York] won't just quit / that woman of his" (WWC 90). In a show of his power over a York inspirited by his contributions to the expedition and frustrated with enslaved life, Clark sells York's enslaved wife further south.

This imbalance of power haunts Walker's books. While Walker celebrates York as a critically aware ecological agent able to deftly navigate human and nonhuman worlds, he also depicts how York's ecological literacy does not transcend the conditions of his enslavement. "Primer II" explores this bind, noting, first, York's ecological agency. Walker writes,

> I can read the heart ova woman in her eyes
> as easy as a lie in a man's face.
>
> The direction an power ova storm speaks
> clearly to me from low-flying bird wings.
>
> I can dip my fingers into muddy hoof or toe print
> an tell how many a what I'm gone have for dinner.

> The thickness a tree bark, walnut hulls, an tobacco worms
> Tell me how ugly winter gone be.
>
> I knows the seasons like a book. I can read moss, sunsets, the moon, an a mare's foaling time with a touch.
> (WWC 46)

Yet York "would trade all this" for scribal literacy, the right to "*come an go as he please, / work for hisself, own land, learn his books, / live, an die free*" (WWC 46–47). Although "Primer" credits the richness of orality represented by the storytelling of Old York, it and "Primer II" stress that scribal illiteracy marks the powerlessness of the enslaved.

A scribally illiterate enslaved man, York is both subject to and a participant in U.S. empire. Presumed to be "the first African American to cross the United States from coast to coast and the North American continent north of Mexico" (Holmberg 151), York participated involuntarily in the necessary footwork for the United States to expand its empire westward. Slavery also leaves him inside and outside this empire's history. For instance, even though he is left outside of expedition tales told by the party's European American members (as can be read in "Revisionist History" and "Role Call"), he remains inside the purpose and results of the expedition, which include the decimation of Native American communities (as can be read in "Dream Catcher" and "The Melting"). Walker's poetry thus does not absolve York for his participation in an expedition that would lead to the ruin of so many Native peoples. It is clear that one product of York's successful contributions to the expedition is the enabling of empire—in particular, support for its frontier myth to flourish.

In his book *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature*, Michael K. Johnson explains the frontier myth's dimensions:

> As a much repeated ideological narrative in American culture, the frontier myth has most often served the interests of the dominant race, class, and gender, providing a mythic justification for the positions of power held by middle-class white males. The myth is based on a racial opposition between the "civilized" (white) and the "savage" (nonwhite, usually American Indian but often African American or even lower-class whites or white immigrants) and tells the story of the evolutionary inevitability of the triumph of civilization over savagery and the dominance of the white race over all other races. The frontier myth is the narrative of the civilized individual's journey westward into the savage American wilderness. (7)

York's subjugation is part of the racist ideology that supports the idea of "the triumph of civilization over savagery." However, Walker uncovers a counternarrative to the frontier myth in his depiction of human encounters that he envisions went on under the radar of the expedition leaders.

This counternarrative appears as well in poems that depict the relationship between Clark and York as a dissolved marriage. "Irreconcilable Differences" shares that York has had a "fill a [their] union" after Clark refuses to treat York any better after returning from the expedition (WWC 96). "Til Death Do Us Part" uses Clark's point of view to express that "It was [Clark's] idea to take [York] / on the great expedition. It ruined a good slave. It ruined a great relationship. / And that kills [Clark]" (WWC 102). "Prenupt Agreement" creates an equation of expedition facts, with numerical references such as "1 president's dream," a "55 foot keelboat," "420 pounds of sheet lead for bullets," "4,600 sewing needles," and "8,000 miles" amounting to

> 2 heroes
> double pay for all
> 320 acres a land for the men
> 1600 acres for the captains
> an
> nothin' for York.
> (WWC 87)

Walker's poems offer a different way to account for the benefits of the expedition. They highlight the moments when human interaction can yield positive worldviews that have the potential to reorient humans to appreciate themselves as part of the natural world. York's philosophical and cultural kinship with Native peoples and his pride in his own African American heritage deepen his love for nonhuman nature and his understanding of human beings. Although Frank X Walker's poetry is spawned by the life of one man, it is communal in its scope. In writing York's life as a collective biography, Walker casts new light on the ecological impact of the expedition and York's activity as an ecological agent.

Harriet Tubman's accomplishments are as individual and unique as York's. Unlike York, her life has garnered considerable attention in the popular and scholarly press. Well-renowned as an Underground Railroad "conductor" who returned to slaveholding states repeatedly to help direct enslaved African Americans to freedom, she was also a nurse, spy,

and scout for the Union Army in South Carolina during the Civil War; women's rights advocate; abolitionist; institution builder; and champion of the poor and elderly. Catherine Clinton, in an epilogue titled "Harriet Tubman's Legacy" in her recent study of Tubman, notes that institutions as broad ranging as elementary schools, museums, "hot lines and shelters for fugitive women and children," and a "*digitized* research facility at York University in Ontario" are all associated with her name (219). Clinton also points out the living legacy associated with Tubman. She writes, "For countless American blacks living today, Harriet Tubman was not just a mythical figure but a flesh-and-blood liberator who delivered their ancestors to freedom. There are by now *thousands* of African Americans whose grandparents or great-grandparents trace their freedom to Tubman. . . . Their deliverance was a concrete gift of freedom" (Clinton 220).

Tubman was certainly an extraordinary woman, and she has a Caribbean predecessor whose life bears comparison here. Jenny Sharpe admits in *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women's Lives* that "the story of Nanny is the story of contending forms of knowledge: written versus oral histories, colonial versus national cultures, institutional versus popular ways of knowing" (2); however, what can be said is that in the minds of many she was a woman of African ancestry who was crucial to resistance against slavery in a nation outside the United States: Jamaica. "Nanny is a figure of resistance, whose significance as a rebel woman is bound up with Jamaican national independence. It is an indication of her symbolic value to national self-identity that she is the most celebrated woman from the era of slavery in Jamaica" (Sharpe xvi). Taken together, Tubman and Nanny represent two forms of ecological agency at work in the African diaspora: Tubman employing ecological knowledge for the task of movement, Nanny utilizing ecological knowledge for the task of stasis, both amid hostile forces working toward their demise. With her "bush chemistry," and her medicinal, military, culinary, and psychological skill, Nanny would use her own brand of "science" to lead "a group of runaway slaves in Jamaica known as the windward maroons" (Sharpe xii). Maintaining the borders of her community, Nanny established such a presence in Jamaica that the British signed treaties with maroons. Harriet's legend grew from her ability to move both herself and others across varying terrain. As Sharpe points out, "a language for naming the power slave women might have exercised" (xxv) sometimes eludes the contemporary reader. Regardless of the differences between the two women and

the terrains they negotiated, Nanny and Harriet Tubman shared a power with a common name: the power to apply knowledge to the liberation of their people. Through their ecological agency they were able to negotiate the social and natural demands necessary for communal survival.

Despite the ecological expertise needed to lead people under cover of night (usually during winter when there was the most darkness), Tubman is not usually written into the annals of U.S. ecological history. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century has experienced a recent surge in Tubman scholarship and creative writing.[7] These texts help explain why Tubman had the ecological confidence to go on repeated journeys into slaveholding America. It is clear she relied on a web of African American and European American collaborators and utilized knowledge about the nonhuman natural world garnered during her childhood and early adulthood.

Tubman began taking care of children and performing other domestic duties when she was only a child. The horrific abuse she faced in these situations caused her to develop a preference for work outside the big house. "Frequently Harriet worked for her father, who was a timber inspector, and superintended the cutting and hauling of great quantities of timber for the Baltimore ship-yards" (Humez 179). These opportunities for father-daughter knowledge transmission encouraged Tubman, who was quite proud of her physical prowess, whereas domestic labor left her subject to shame, admonition, and painful punishments. "She learned to prefer if not enjoy physical exertion. In the wide-open spaces of the woods and fields, she came into her own. She developed awesome stamina" (Clinton 20). In addition to her father's instruction, Tubman collected ecological knowledge from experience outdoors that included a broader community of men. Larson writes,

> The disabled Tubman went to work on a timber gang, exhibiting great skill laboring in the logging camps and in the fields. There she was exposed to the secret communication networks that were the province of black watermen and other free and enslaved blacks. . . . As one of the few women working in the forests on a timber gang . . . Tubman became part of an exclusively male world. Here in the forests, beyond the watchful eye of white masters, the male slaves had access to the [free] black watermen . . . [and] black mariners. . . . These black men were part of a larger world, a world beyond the plantation, beyond the woods, that reached out to towns and cities. . . . They knew the safe places, they knew the sympathetic whites, and, more important, they knew the danger. They created a veiled and secret world parallel to the white masters' world. (65)

The secret world of free and enslaved black men "[spread] notions of liberty and freedom, relay[ed] the details of revolution in Haiti, shar[ed] news of abolition and colonization efforts and other political issues, and pass[ed] messages between members of families separated from one another" (Larson 66). While this network provided information from as far away as Haiti, it would also equip Tubman with local and regional information she could use in her own and subsequent liberation journeys.

Tubman's long life and considerable achievement provide many entry points for the verbal artist to add desired dimension to the life of a woman who left no self-authored documents. An example from children's literature imagines how, first, Tubman prepared for her own escape and self-liberation.[8] *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman*, by Alan Schroeder, depicts the ecological education that primed Tubman to free herself and then so many others. It imagines Tubman's father making routine trips to the woods to transmit his ecological knowledge. "Old Ben" expresses his love for his daughter and honors her passion and commitment to being free by preparing her to navigate a potentially deadly journey. Among Harriet's lessons are "how to read a tree" and the location of the "Drinking Gourd" (i.e., the Big Dipper). Their interactions convey a high level of African American engagement with the nonhuman natural world.

While wilderness could be a site of racialized violence, for many African Americans it became a site of geographic transition; some chose to escape slavery temporarily to visit friends and family in neighboring areas, some found a site of refuge and lived permanently in maroon settings, and others used wilderness to transport themselves to safe built environments. Quraysh Ali Lansana's *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems* ponders the lives of the adult Tubman and those who trust her enough to take the risk of running away. Lansana gives a collective portrait of survivalism in African American experience of the natural world during escape; his collection inhabits the bodies, minds, and images of fugitives in motion. Through his artistic rendition of Harriet Tubman's world, Lansana focuses on both the physicality of escape and the psychological tools that helped fugitives maintain themselves as they fought for freedom. Lansana communicates the psychological and physiological consequences of life among those at the bottom of human hierarchies and illustrates the ecological agency necessary for survival in extremely stressful circumstances.

As the title suggests, *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems* (TSR) builds a collective portrait of Tubman and the world around her. Using the voice of Tubman and others, Lansana's poems bear witness to collective

experiences of wilderness in the past, extending the relevance of multicultural perspectives about America's nonhuman nature back in time. Before poem titles Lansana often includes names to distinguish which communal subject is the point of view; many poems are in "harriet's" voice but others include "revolver" (the weapon Tubman sometimes used to motivate fugitives to continue their journey), "joe" (Tubman's first husband), "negro hunter," "negro dog," and "john ross" (Tubman's brother). In addition, four "dreamprints" honor the interpretation of dreams, a practice Tubman valued, as part of the information that shaped Tubman's trips. Over the course of these varied poetic voices and styles, the ecological pertinence of Lansana's collection highlights the role of physical movement and the psychological facets to survivalism in the enslaved's relationship to nature.

Christian imagery of heaven, hell, and purgatory marks the fugitive slave's life at the beginning of this text. Lansana quotes Tubman as saying that "slavery is the next thing to hell" and uses this image to frame what he describes as "purgatory": the period between escaping and before reaching free land (which "harriet" refers to as "promised lan"). *They Shall Run* conveys intermediacy fluidly. "purgatory," the first poem, employs couplets and enjambment to distinguish the intermediate space where fugitives are on "this path of becoming" (1). Various elements reinforce interstitial place: "callous feet muster creek / rock between toes," Tubman's situatedness ("half her body / lost in river / the other in stars"), a "young man's" position between Tubman and his wife and child, and the "broken ones / in back" (behind the "young man's family) plagued by "ghosts" who "rattl[e] their bones" (1). The layout of "dreamprint two" reiterates intermediacy as well. Lansana writes,

endless trembles
water whispers
groaning wind
belly rumbles
gash sunlight
crimson clouds
alabaster carving
(TSR 16)

The space between lines and words invites multiple readings of this "dreamprint": both words on a line can be read together in traditional

left-to-right fashion, or columns of words can be read individually from top to bottom, creating the effect of two stanzas aligned right next to one another. Regardless of the reading manner it inspires, the sparse poem captures the sensory experience of the fugitive slaves whose hunger and fear generate a sharp awareness of their environment. Through imagery that fuses the natural world and the body, Lansana suggests this "path of becoming" brings fugitives closer to the environment ruthlessly. They must eke out survival in dire conditions while being pursued by hostile humans. Finally, Lansana's poetry inhabits intermediacy through the perspective of a dog used to track fugitive slaves in "thoughts on the matter of runaways." The "negro dog" complains that the slave master

> doesn't let me out
> for anythin else
> i live to run
> this cage makes me crazy
> leaves my blood funny.
> (TSR 23)

Here, the dog anxiously awaits the next opportunity to "trai[n] or chas[e]," and its predicament of being locked in a cage until it is able to run reminds the reader of the limited movement faced by the enslaved. In both human and nonhuman animal facets of *They Shall Run*, liminality predominates.[9]

Elsewhere, Lansana details the psychological result of this intermediate existence between slavery and freedom. "the leaving" portrays "isaiah's" sheer anxiety about Tubman's practice of leaving fugitives in the woods while she procured information or resources from a nearby area. The poem describes that he and thirteen other fugitives are left "in de middle / of pitch black sky" with only the moon to see them; they "pray starin back / from de murky river" (13). His frustration over "crossin / wide water wid no ripple" makes him cry "she gone again my lord / why here aint de red sea / where she go when she go" (13). Isaiah makes reference to a story embedded deeply in antebellum African American culture: the exodus narrative that details the enslavement of Hebrews, who were able to cross the parted Red Sea with Pharaoh's army behind them and the Promised Land ahead of them. "burdens" delves into Tubman's response to the immense responsibility she faced as a liberator who earned the nickname of "Moses" because she did indeed get all of her passengers across the Red Sea of slavery. Lansana writes in her voice,

folk live in my bones
breathe ma breath
we night like skin

i bear de weight
ma back bent ta light

draggin de moon
like a shackle

i pray dis night is silent as dawn's feet
(TSR 14)

Here nature is treacherous, as seen in the simile comparing the moon to a shackle. During their attempt to transform their environment and live as free people, natural elements such as the moon and rivers become burdens and obstacles. Their struggle to own themselves eclipses the experience of nonhuman nature as comforting, yet emphasizing intermediacy allows Lansana to allude to the idea that this relationship can change if they can subvert the human institutions that oppress them. Lansana gives voice to negative perceptions of the nonhuman natural environment that are linked to histories of human oppression.

Lansana's poems flesh out this history and help readers understand why some communities may have negative associations with nonhuman nature and those who claim an environmentalist identity that excludes others. Discussing the tendency on the part of some African Americans to dismiss environmental concerns, Shamara Shantu Riley writes in her essay "Ecology Is a Sistah's Issue Too: The Politics of Emergent Afrocentric Ecowomanism," "The resistance by many United States Blacks to the environmental movement may partly originate from a hope of revenge. Because of our acute oppression(s), many Blacks conclude that if the world comes to an end because of willful negligence, at least there is the satisfaction that one's oppressors will also die" (413). Riley proclaims that communities that bear extreme oppressions may be too diminished to see beyond their ecological burden and fight for sustainability.

The voice of "harriet" in the combination of the poems "earthwalkers" and "mountains" speculates on how Tubman may have mitigated the perilous environmental circumstances she and her fellow fugitives faced. They are poems of people who must move, for "fixity is a function of power.

Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The 'placeless,' by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional" (Baker 202). Thus, the images of the "placeless" who encounter earth and mountains translate the lives of people who could not "fix" themselves in a hostile landscape long enough to enjoy nonhuman nature. "earthwalkers" first provides vivid testimony to these trials, which include pursuing humans firing gunshots "[be]hind de dark hill," the "devil's fingers creepin [in] de valley," dog barks that "cut [Tubman's] soul," neither water nor safehouse, and only "mudrock" for a bed (TSR 20). "Mountains" begins with this testimony as well. Tubman leads a group of wet fugitives up a mountain in the middle of "muddy sky" and "muddy dirt" with the moon behind "saggin onry clouds," yet to cope with this difficult mission Tubman relies on a deep religiosity that was a constant part of her life. The poem concludes with the italicized plea, "*dont stay far away o god / hurry ta ma side*" (TSR 21).

Unlike the African–Native American religious awareness depicted in the Walker poetry, Lansana's poems rely strictly on black biblical iconography, as can be seen in Tubman's hope that the mountain they climb will be their "zion / dat holy rock stuck strong / in [God's] green glory-fields" (21). In Lansana's poems, this religiosity sees Tubman and her followers through bleak moments in their liberatory travels: their theology provides the kind of positive motivation their physical world could not. Lansana's collective biography of Harriet Tubman serves as a testament that movement, rather than stasis, can be a catalyst for literature about wilderness. By inhabiting the stark physical circumstances involved in this movement, Lansana also locates the psychological elements of survivalism that were such a crucial aspect of the ecological agency necessary to reach free land.

George Washington Carver, an agricultural scientist and inventor, best represents the acquisition of Western scientific practices, an accomplishment that adds to an African American tradition rich with the vernacular medicinal knowledge of people such as York and Tubman. Like Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver is a mainstay of children's and young adult literature. Unlike those of Tubman and York, Carver's accomplishments are understood as evidence of ecological agency as can be seen in documentaries such as *Modern Marvels: George Washington Carver Tech* and trade publications such as Jennifer Rogers's *George Washington Carver:*

Nature's Trailblazer. Rogers's book is part of the Earth Keepers series, which profiles such important ecological visionaries as Henry David Thoreau, Jane Goodall, Rachel Carson, Jacques Cousteau, and John Muir.

Marilyn Nelson's *Carver: A Life in Poems* provides a picture of Carver that expands his inclusion among ecological ancestors through a positive reading of his human-sensitive approach to scientific endeavor. Nelson depicts a scientist who is able to transform his work into communal advancement. In the same vein as Lansana's and Walker's poetry, Nelson's poetry focuses on one person, yet creates a collective biography.[10] Through research and imagination, she reenters history, providing another lens through which to view not only Carver but also events and issues that resonate beyond his life. In her work, Nelson creates a Carver who has a human-sensitive outlook that is nevertheless tempered by his sheer wonder at the nonhuman elements of nature and a moral commitment to the entire Earth because it is what he considers God's creation.

Even though Carver had the shortest experience of enslavement of the three historical figures in this chapter, he nevertheless was significantly impacted by the violence of slavery. Nelson gives her imaginative treatment of his early life in "Out of 'Slave's Ransom,'" in which she depicts an incident early in Carver's life: an enslaved infant, born about 1864, he and his mother Mary are kidnapped from their owner Moses Carver. John Bentley, a man hired to find the two slaves, is able to find only the baby wrapped in "a bundle of wet rags, convulsive with fever and shook by the whooping cough" (9). Perhaps because of his early bout with whooping cough and because he was a "puny . . . baby" (9), Carver was a physically small and frail adult. His biological mother had already been sold, and he would never see her again.[11] While his adoptive parents, his "owner" Moses Carver and his wife, treated him and his brother like their own children, Carver led a postslavery life that was saturated with discrimination and saddled with the immense task of educating the first generation of blacks outside of slavery, with insufficient funds and resources. Although he demonstrated signs of intellectual talent early, his intellectual growth was tainted by life in postslavery America. "The Perceiving Self" relays a time in 1879 when Carver sees a lynching. "Friends in the Klan" dramatizes an incident in which Carver receives a cautionary letter from a white "friend." In linking vernacular African American culture and university approaches to science during this difficult time, he chose not to leave undereducated African Americans behind; instead, he made them

the beneficiaries of his scientific endeavors.[12] Nelson's collection interprets how he merged a fierce commitment to scientific inquiry and dedication to service.

"Arachis Hypogaea" begins with the specific cultural import of Carver's favorite scientific subject, the peanut, and illustrates Carver's mix of science and culture. Although the peanut is indigenous to many parts of the world, it holds a special significance in African and African American cultures, playing a large part in culinary traditions. The first verse of the poem describes a romantic legend that the peanut "may have been / smuggled to North America by slaves who hid seeds of survival in their hair." The peanut becomes a symbol of African survival during slavery where "tended by moonlight and exhaustion, [a slave's peanut] seed might grow to be [his/her] children's manna in the wilderness." Verse two pays homage to the peanut's scientific specificity, describing the plant's, flower's, and pistillate's appearance. The final verse merges further scientific description with Carver's use of the peanut, explaining,

> From the laboratory of a slave emerged
> a varied diet for the poor,
> stock foods, ink, paints, cosmetics, medicines. . . .
> Promise and purpose, the Ancestors' dream.
> (78)

At a time when it was assumed that Africa was a tabula rasa and people of African descent were seen as intellectually inferior because of their supposed racial category, Nelson depicts a Carver who forges a strong connection to African and African American culture with his scientific work. "Arachis Hypogaea" celebrates his integration of these elements of his life.

A question written by Carver which Nelson uses as an epigraph for "Arachis Hypogaea," "Great Creator, why did you make the peanut?" indicates what is perhaps the most controversial aspect of Carver's work: a method that might be best described as "scientific spiritualism." Gary Kremer writes, "Young George had gotten a good dose of regular Bible reading during his stay with Mariah Watkins, but his religious fervor seemed to stem more from a deep, personal mysticism . . . an almost pantheistic sense of identifying God with nature and communicating with Him through the forces of His creation. . . . He never separated the worlds of science and religion; he saw them as mutually acceptable and compatible

tools for arriving at truth" (6). The apparent coexistence of biblical and pantheistic theology in Carver's spiritual outlook and scientific method hints at the religious syncretism popular in African American communities: it integrates Christian religious doctrine and iconography with traditional African religious worship styles and concepts so common in African diaspora cultures. This is something more than the "personal mysticism" that Kremer suggests. Indeed, "The transformation of the word science as a distinct rationality valued above magic is uniquely European. It is not common to most non-Western societies, where magic and science and religion can easily co-exist. The empirical, scientific realm of understanding and inquiry is not readily separable from a more abstract, religious realm" (Selin v–vi).

Carver's scientific spiritualism is reflected in the African-descended culture of his time. One of the benefits of ancestral connections can be access to repositories of ideas that provide alternatives to dominant paradigms. Toni Morrison elaborates on this interplay between the "more abstract, religious realm" and critical thinking in African American culture when she writes,

> I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had: discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was "discredited." And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work. (Morrison 329–30)

Knowledge that accommodates both the material world and the supernatural has a very strong place in Nelson's depiction of Carver as well.

Throughout the collection Nelson depicts Carver as enthralled with inquiring scientifically on "God's Earth," and she renders artistically Carver's effort to encourage others to adopt this cosmology. In "Professor Carver's Bible Class," Carver convinces a student to supplant the "master narrative" of a paternalistic, vengeful God with one that invites people

to be ecologically aware and alert. A student's voice that serves as the poem's point of view explains the class "gave . . . the means/to liberation from that slavish faith." The poem's final line incorporates Carver's own words (in italics): "*Your Creator*, he said, *is itching to contact you!*" During a Carver-led Bible study class that would meet for thirty years, he introduces the idea that "all of nature . . . is a vast broadcasting system" for God's voice (75).

Carver's goal of unifying science and religion also encouraged a love of nature and critical thinking. In the "Last Talk with Jim Hardwick," Nelson's Carver conveys the idea that the environment is such a great conserver that it is only natural that it conserves human souls. Nelson's poem blends ecological principles about nonhuman nature (e.g., the idea that there is no such thing as waste, only changes in form) with spiritual ideas about human life. The poem closes,

> After
> I leave this world
> I do not believe I am through.
> God would be a bigger fool
> than even a man
> if He did not conserve
> the human soul,
> which seems to be
> the most important thing
> He has yet done in the universe.
> (95)

Nelson's historically informed imaginative inhabiting of Carver's voice yields a figure who is able to celebrate human beings as one of God's most important creations while not obscuring the fact that humans must be respectful and knowledgeable of all of God's creations. The idea of spiritual conservation in the plant world also resounds in "The Wild Garden" where she writes,

> If all crops perished, the race could survive
> on a balanced diet of wild vegetables.
> The homeliest, lowest,
> torn out by the roots, poisoned;
> the 'inferior,' the 'weeds'
> They grow despite our will to kill them . . .

> We refuse to thank them,
> but they keep coming back
> with the Creator's handwritten invitation.
> (70–71)

Part of Carver's scientific spiritualism included the idea that God was ecologically efficient, and with time and careful study human beings could discover the reason for all of God's creations. In Carver's estimation, scientific curiosity could allay the ungodliness of waste.

Contemporary religious fundamentalism is often characterized as a barrier to scientific inquiry, and Carver faced serious resistance to his religious faith during his time as well. "Eureka" describes an incident in which Carver is castigated for his admission that inspiration played a role in his scientific process. Nelson makes a reference to a *New York Times* editorial that "ridicule[d]" him "[b]ecause REAL scientists / do not ascribe their successes / to 'inspiration'" (85). After an "Associated Press story about Carver's peanut-oil massages as a treatment for polio brings throngs of polio victims to Carver's door" (89), Carver's combination of spirituality and science is put to a demanding test. "The Penol Cures" not only relays the successful treatment of one young polio victim but also shows the limitations of Carver's discovery, saying, "There were many successes, / but many failures as well" (89). Nelson alludes to the perceptions of Carver's methods by the mainstream scientific community in the poem's final verse:

> The results of Carver's Penol experiments
> were unsatisfactory and irreproducible,
> the cause of those cures being
> unquantifiable
> and wholly unscientific.
> (89)

Carver, A Life in Poems explores aspects of his scientific spiritualism; at the same time, it acknowledges moments when the intended result was elusive. Nelson's poetry does not glorify this aspect of Carver's life or overlook the limitations of this epistemology; instead, she posits that within the context of Carver's scientific outlook, these instances of "unquantifiable" benefits were to be expected as God's purpose, and "logic" was sometimes outside the reach of human understanding. Despite negative

feedback from some scientists, Carver would remain committed to his scientific spiritualist method until his death.

While "The Penol Cures" illustrates the possible limitations of Carver's spiritual-scientific method, it also demonstrates Carver's firm commitment to helping the public. In his 1956 address to the third annual Christian Liberal Arts Festival at Simpson College, titled "The World Significance of the Carver Story," diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche remarked,

> In a world in which so many areas, so many populations, fit the description "under-developed"; in which the bare essentials of a decent standard of living are unknown to so very many; in which hunger and misery are still the virtual way of life for literally hundreds of millions; in which the demand for a better life by long suffering masses grows daily more insistent . . . in such a world, I vow, the Carver Story, the story of science and scientist dedicated wholeheartedly to the betterment of man, has truly magnificent meaning; it is indeed epochal. (7)

Although his comments are now more than fifty years old, Bunche delineates a world much like the present one, where ecological crisis threatens numerous populations on the planet. Bunche's comments suggest that as an ecological ancestor, Carver's "epochal" impact rests, in part, on his ability to respond to the needs of marginalized human beings, with work that did not ignore humans' need to live in concord with the nonhuman world.

Carver's commitment to the poor was unshakeable; he did everything in his power to ensure that his scientific discoveries would help downtrodden farmers. The "suffering of poor Southern farmers . . . in what he called 'the lowlands of sorrow' greatly troubled him. Carver envisioned the mysteries of the universe in order to improve the quality of life for everyone, particularly the poor. . . . He believed that nothing existed without purpose. The job of the scientist was to discover the purpose and publicize its possible benefits for mankind" (Kremer 102). Despite invitations to teach or head much better-equipped institutions at a higher salary, Carver remained dedicated to his teaching at Tuskegee Institute, a historically black university in Alabama. The poem "House Ways and Means" demonstrates that his advocacy even brought him to the U.S. House of Representatives to present "in support of a protective tariff on peanuts" (Nelson 77). Carver gracefully avoided responding to a racist comment

from Republican Congressman John Tilson, who asked if Carver wanted watermelon to go with his peanuts.

"From an Alabama Farmer" exemplifies the gratitude from beneficiaries of Carver's dedication "to the betterment of man"–the poetic voice here not only eager to thank Carver but also excited about learning the science behind his success. Nelson conveys the voice of a farmer with untutored writing skills who has followed Carver's advice and has concrete results to prove its worth ("mo better butter" and "a bompercrop"). Yet even more than a letter of thanks, the poem conveys that Carver has excited in the farmer such intellectual curiosity that he wants to establish conversation about agriculture wonders. The poem continues,

> How did you found
> out you coud use swamp mock? I presheate
> your answer Dr. Carver by mail soon.
> What maid my cotton grow? It do fele grate
> to see the swet off your brow com to bloom.
> I want to now what maid my miricle.
> Your humbel servint, (*name illegible*)
> (39)

With the appearance of a "found poem," it reads as if it were an actual letter written to Carver that documents the appreciation of those whom Carver served. In addition, the farmer's description of the results of Carver's recommendations as a "miricle" reflects a communal appreciation of Carver's scientific-spiritualist method. Forming the poem as a Shakespearean sonnet, Nelson elevates the language of what appears to be an untutored writer. This connection between vernacular speech, rarified literary form, and scientific wonder underscores the importance of Carver as an intellectual and creative ambassador to the poor and African American farmers he served.[13] A notorious antimaterialist who also felt individualism supported egotistical behavior out of sync with righteousness, Carver had a personal appearance that belied his importance; his well-worn clothing prompted some to assume he was destitute and homeless. His appearance was in keeping with his ethical commitment to shunning waste and materialism.

It is routine to discuss Carver's scientific achievements as the clearest evidence of his legacy. Marilyn Nelson's poetry, though, adds the idea of Carver as a morally driven ecological agent and leader. Her work, particu-

larly her depiction of Carver's scientific approach, advocacy for the poor, and ecological morality, positions Carver as a visionary conscious of sustainability long before the popularization of the term. His human-sensitive efforts demonstrate the ways in which improving human life may, in fact, improve the health of other segments of nature.

Conclusion

In his study of Harriet Tubman, Milton C. Sernett is skeptical about historiography's influence over public mythology. He writes, "Access to more factual information about the woman who was already a legend in her own lifetime may not be an effective antidote to the inaccuracies and exaggerations that are embedded in American public memory. In their search for a usable past, Americans will continue to be selective, culling out that which serves their needs from the dross that does not. Historians do their work situated in their own times" (Sernett 315–16). Sernett may indeed underestimate the public's interest in the work of professional historians. However, the respect for oral and written history present in the work of Frank X Walker, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Marilyn Nelson suggests that the work of professional artists may be a way to bridge the focus on thoroughness and accuracy in history and the need for artful renderings of historical figures in national memory.

In reinforcing a bridge between the artistic and historical record, these authors highlight various forms of ecological agency in their subjects' lives. Their work allows readers to claim the historical figures as ecological ancestors, archetypes who embody honorable actions and attitudes. York stands tall as a representative who experiences positive readings of human biodiversity; whose physical, botanical, and hunting skills provide invaluable support; and who seeks out commonality with nonhuman nature and other marginalized peoples. His near lifelong enslavement and incredible travels left him with ecological burden and beauty entangled permanently. Tubman shines as an expert navigator equipped with not only social and geographic knowledge but also the spiritual fortitude to liberate herself and others from environments made unforgiving by oppressive human systems. She shepherded African Americans through the burden of captivity and escape to enjoy the bittersweet beauty of liberation. Carver resonates as the scientific spiritualist who makes Christianity compatible with scientific inquiry and whose commitment to humans and

nonhuman nature strives to recognize them both as God's creations. He bypassed the ecological burden of presumed intellectual inferiority and brought Western science to a newly free generation of African Americans. All three historical figures go from enslavement to ecological agency.

The singularity of their lives makes it inexcusable to conclude that their stellar accomplishments are somehow communal property; however, the poetry studied in this chapter demonstrates the communal consciousness of these historical figures' individual lives. Through this neo–slave poetry we read York, Harriet, and George as eco-agents beholden to and in love with community. Rather than rugged individualism, wisdom and action borne of communal life strengthen these heroes. Overlapping themes in the poetry of movement, racism, botanical knowledge, and religious faith forge connections among these ecological ancestors and also root them to the experiences of other African Americans.

The poets' variations on a collective biographical approach help us understand these historical figures not only as individuals but also as communally concerned people whose lives often symbolize elements of the larger African American ecological experience. All three poets pay tribute to nonrational ways of relating to the environment: Walker in vision quests, Lansana in "dreamprints," and Nelson through depicting Carver's reliance on inspiration. Religious connections between human beings and the environment are honored as well. Written and oral histories serve as touchstones in the works. Language is another wellspring. Even though all three poets use both standard and African American vernacular English, Walker incorporates indigenous and African references, Lansana writes entire poems in African languages, and Nelson includes a multitude of forms and registers. Walker and Nelson also include photos and other historical references. Their artistic-historical products ground readers in the past to set forth powerful images for now and the future.

For African Americans, acknowledging these historical figures' contributions, especially through the poetic statements about them, can help undo oppressive narratives that render people of African descent ecologically null and void. As noted by bell hooks, "Collective black self-recovery takes place when [African Americans] begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors. When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us" (182). However, African American ancestral ways have considerable implications for indirect beneficiaries of their legacies, too. Simply put, expanding our pantheon

of ancestors promises to help all people think critically and increase their efforts to enact ecological justice. In the words of Alice Walker, "In the America we are building, [our ancestors] laid many a foundation. In the America that will be, they have an honored place" (*Living by the Word* 129).

Canadian ecologist David Suzuki helps us think about how the world's ancestors had an impact on our current lives. He points out in *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* that participation in ecological knowledge making was crucial to the world's past: "The knowledge of every band of human beings, acquired and accumulated through generations of observation, experience and conjecture, was a priceless legacy for survival" (11). With York, Harriet Tubman, and George Washington Carver acknowledged and integrated thoroughly into history and imagination, they stand poised to enrich a global dialogue about an ecologically sound present and future.

THREE

Animal Nature

Finding Ecotheology

I hear people say, "A lot of environmentalists, they don't believe in God." I could care less whether you believe in Him or not. Charlotte Keys believe in Jesus Christ. And I do know that all that have possession of all this worldly stuff and that do not share their wealth, with the poor, the needy, the underserved communities, they're going to suffer severely on that judgment day when Jesus Christ crack this sky and come. Because they're creating all this hell for people to live in. . . . People don't have access to the funding that's needed to create a clean environment that they righteously deserve.

–Evangelist Charlotte Keys, Founder, Jesus People Against Pollution (2008)

My favorite book of the Bible is Job. I think it says more about my father's God in particular and gods in general than anything else I've ever read.

–"Lauren Olamina," *Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia Butler (1993)

All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice.

–Alice Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven . . ." (1997)

Call: The Word for Earth

"They don't believe in God. . . ." Charlotte Keys responds to a perceived gap between the worlds of environmentalism and religion with a passionate pronouncement of her religious belief. Why would such a gap exist?

What makes environmentalism incompatible with religion? Perhaps because, for some, environmentalism takes on religious importance itself? For instance, William Cronon asks, "Is environmentalism a religion?" (Dunlap xi). Reflecting on this question he writes, "Environmentalism, in short, grapples with ultimate questions at every scale of human existence, from the cosmic to the quotidian, from the apocalyptic to the mundane. More than most human endeavors, this is precisely what religions aspire to do" (Dunlap xii). The notion that environmentalism itself may be a religion further complicates discussions of the role of belief in finding a sustainable future, yet it also points to the fact that people do desire belief systems which help them confront a variety of aspects of everyday life.

In addition to the cosmic, quotidian, apocalyptic, and the mundane, African Americans have also used religion to confront the unjust. So, for African Americans such as Keys, religion and environmental justice work inform one another rather than stand apart. Devout in her belief and determined in her actions, Keys is an example of how people use their religion to address ecological crises. Keys began the organization Jesus People Against Pollution after her community in Columbia, Mississippi, surrounded by a Superfund site, was devastated by chemical waste and a subsequent rise in disease.[1] Although she fights for the recovery of her community, she believes firmly that the twin sins of polluting and hoarding material wealth will be punished upon the second coming of Jesus Christ. Christian ideology infuses Keys's work in creating a cleaner neighborhood on Earth and her faith that justice will prevail no matter when it should come to pass.

Keys's title of evangelist invites an association with an emerging group of green evangelicals. A fairly recent aspect of U.S. religious identity, environmentalism now is understood by some to be a key platform for advancing the socially conservative aims of groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The organization's 2004 document "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call for Civic Responsibility" calls for its members to "labor to protect God's creation," which Richard Cizik terms "creation care" (NAE 11). The document also endorses other areas of concern typically associated with U.S. evangelicals: ending abortion rights, establishing heteronormative standards for marriage and child rearing, and criminalizing euthanasia and embryonic stem-cell research. Yet they also make the following call: "We urge Christians to shape their personal lives in creation-friendly ways: practicing effective recycling,

conserving resources, and experiencing the joy of contact with nature. We urge government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats" (NAE 12). The political mobilization of thousands of so-called green evangelicals promises to make a serious impact on the U.S. political horizon. Mainstream environmental groups such as the National Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club have tried to collaborate with the NAE; however, Cizik argues that green evangelicals need time to distinguish themselves within the environmentalist movement. One distinguishing aspect is their "reaffirm[ation of] the important truth that we worship only the Creator and not the creation" (NAE 11). The NAE firmly rests on what they believe is the sanctity of the Bible as the truth and God as the creator of the planet.

However, conservative, evangelical Christians are not the only religious people championing environmental issues. The multifaith organization Faith in Place works to "give religious people the tools to become good stewards of the Earth" (C. Butterfield). Although they work with people of many different faiths, congregations from the three widely recognized Abrahamic religions (i.e., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) are among Faith in Place's partnering institutions. A LEED-certified synagogue, sustainably grown sacred foods, and youth-focused vermiculture programs are among the ways they express religious belief and explicit commitment to a sustainable life. Like Charlotte Keys, these congregations feel canonical religious texts such as the Qur'an, the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian Bible are crucial to stemming the tide of environmental devastation. They find these texts to be sufficient in providing the religious guidance needed to make the transition to an environmentally progressive future.

These are, of course, examples of religious peoples whose beliefs are grounded in written words. Earth-based religions, those without holy books, are additional belief systems that can be evaluated for their pertinence to sustainability. Although not as widespread as book-based religions, Earth-based religions have both ancient (e.g., Yoruba, Inuit) and emerging examples (e.g., Wicca, Germanic neo-paganism). Unlike book-based religions, they are rarely evangelical and seldom seek universal application. Some can be described as site-specific responses that emerge from indigenous populations who have an in-depth knowledge of themselves, the immediate world around them, and place-centered beliefs that reflect these perspectives. This human-sensitive orientation often makes

their description as "ecological" rather than "environmental" more accurate. In these systems, human beings are not understood as separate from the environment, and this is reflected in religious practice. For instance, among the Korekore people of Zimbabwe, sacred sites (e.g., forests, rivers, and mountain ranges), tree species (e.g., baobab, tamarind, fig, and *marula*), and animals inform their religious beliefs. Bruce Byers, an ecologist, learns from the Korekore that "religion is a very practical thing. People must respect nature for a very practical reason: their lives depend on it. It is good to respect sacred places not because of some abstract religiosity, but because people need food, and crops need rain, and only happy ancestors will send good rains" (Byers 655). The interdependence of human beings and other forms of nature in Korekore belief echo an ecological rather than environmental outlook. Around the world, nonindigenous pagans also practice religion that venerates geographic rootedness, human and nonhuman ancestors, elders, and peers.

Within the United States, the character of ecological action among people of African descent reinforces religion as a valuable tool. This religious practice is largely Christian. Studying the many environmental justice leaders and organizations to emerge from African American churches, historian Mark Stoll concludes, "The centrality of religion to African American environmental activism stands out in strong contrast to other comparable social groups. . . . Religion has served African Americans well in their environmental fights. It has supplied them with leaders, instilled confidence, and fired resolve" (154, 163). For leaders such as Keys, the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, which emphasize human equality and justice for the marginalized, have made the book-based religion of Christianity a motivation for activism with ecological import.

Like Keys, African Americans in general have repeatedly positioned the Bible and Christianity at the crossroads of faith and progressive social change. Yet, as evidence of a religious burden-and-beauty paradox, this could not have occurred without an emphasis on critically engaging the Bible's contents, for the Bible was used as textual support for American enslavement. In addition, enslaved African Americans encountered the Bible during a time in America's history when black literacy was discouraged, denied, and penalized. Nevertheless, the Bible made its way into African American culture, and its message was transformed out of the hands of racist oppressors and into those fomenting social justice. Contemporary scholars describing the explicit connection of religion and ecology

in African American Christian culture acknowledge this long tradition of interpreting the Bible for social change and more specifically the influence of black liberation theology. Theologian James Cone–author of numerous titles, including *A Black Theology of Liberation*–coined this term in 1970. The tradition encourages Christians to embrace aspects of the biblical text that specifically support liberation from oppressive social institutions. Historian Dianne D. Glave's essay "Black Environmental Liberation Theology" explains Cone's application of this tradition to ecology and charts the intertwining of religious and ecological concerns in the environmental justice movement. A fifteen-point "Agenda for Action" concludes Glave's article. She cites Galatians 5:13 to support her eighth point: "Model and teach selfless Christian service for environmental justice in the African American community" (198). Eileen M. Smith-Cavros, in a study of black churches in Miami, Florida, writes, "During the Glorious Church of Christ Bible study on the environment . . . participants stressed the importance of taking personal responsibility by conserving resources like electricity and water, while others stressed responsible and sustainable farming and hunting practices that they drew from Biblical quotes" (38). A healthy hermeneutic relationship with the Bible was hard-won for African Americans. Now, this interpretive victory fuels ecological thought and action.

However, it would be inaccurate to describe book-based religion as the only influence on African American Christianity. Even though Christianity and the Bible dominate the religious articulation of African American ecological activism, they share room with Earth-based religious traditions in Africa (and their New World offspring). The emphasis on kinesthetic, participatory (oral), and outwardly cathartic worship are elements of Earth-based religious traditions influencing black Christianity described as "Africanism" by scholars. In addition, the practice of woodland religious worship within enslaved communities, often conducted clandestinely, suggests early African Americans sought ways to syncretize Christianity with traditional African practices that stressed the interrelationship of human and nonhuman nature. I suggest that the predominant focus on human health within African American ecological activism also reflects the influence of African and New World Earth-based beliefs such as "life-centeredness."[2] In "Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective," Malawian Harvey Sindima writes, "When traditional Africans think of creation they think of the relation between human life and nature; a world without people is unthinkable to them, for it is

an incomplete world. . . . Persons are not individual entities or strangers to one another. They are nature itself seeking fullness in the actuality of present life. Since people belong to the fabric of life, their life–like nature–must be respected. This call for respect is also a charge to the community to create possibilities for persons to realize full personhood" (145). Within the Earth-based traditions of which Sindima writes, human beings are simply a manifestation of the natural world ("nature itself") in need of protection just as flora and fauna. The human-sensitive focus of environmental justice work mirrors the humans-as-nature principle in African Earth-based religious practice.

Even though African Americans have a history of linking book- and Earth-based religions with ecological identity, their interpretations have never been uniform. In fact, the authors studied in this chapter, Alice Walker and Octavia Butler, represent two voices in a decidedly iconoclastic wing of African American biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, they propose that religion still has a significant function in ecological progress. They are among the "ecotheologians" Roger Gottlieb identifies, who enlist religion and ancient texts in their ecological concerns. In the essay "Religion in an Age of Environmental Crisis," Gottlieb suggests, "It is too much to expect ancient traditions to be fully adequate to the crisis of today. Despite the brilliance or revelatory quality of the founding teachings, or the way those teachings have been elaborated over the centuries, we now live in a very different world. . . . Creative ecotheologians *synthesize* elements from different traditions" (Gottlieb 10–11). Gottlieb is only partially right. Book-based ancient traditions do motivate many to make the changes necessary for a sustainable future. These traditions are enough for those with a singular, book-based religious identity.[3] However, some others take a broad-based approach to religious insight, pulling from not only various book- and Earth-based religious traditions but also scientific phenomena. For them, synthesis is necessary. This is a call to examine such African American ecotheological creativity.

Response: Science and Spirit

Alice Walker and Octavia Butler are African Americans whose ecotheological writing encompasses both ecological burden and beauty by putting human beings front-and-center in their depictions. Their work supplies a need identified by Carl Anthony. He writes, "We need a new

story about race and place in America. This new story is not only about toxic waste dumps and hazardous materials; it is about the fundamental right of a people to have a relationship with all of creation" (Anthony, "Reflections," 206). Their respective stories involving race and place proclaim that religion can improve our ecological experience. In addition, they fill what Anthony sees as a serious absence. He writes, "African Americans' experiences were not included in *any* of the environmental literature I could get my hands on . . ." (203). In writing ecological literature, Butler and Walker transform African American religious thought by addressing the ecological burden and beauty of relationships people might have with "all of creation."[4] Implicit in this idea is a variety of relationships: with other human beings, with nonhuman animals, with the plant world, with natural and built environments.

As intellectuals, Butler and Walker convey deep understanding about the interrelatedness of ecological and social conditions. Both women's works convey that the phenomena of enslavement, racism, classism, and sexism have made clear the ecological burden of living on society's margins. Indeed, the perspectives of humans most endangered by society's systems take prominence in their work.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu shares a similar human-sensitive outlook in the foreword to *The Green Bible.* He writes,

> I would not know how to be human, how to think as a human being, how to walk as a human being, how to talk or how to eat as a human being except by learning from other human beings. I learn to be human by associating with other human beings. We are thus, according to the Bible, made for family. . . . We're made to live in a delicate network of interdependence, for we are made for complementarity. . . . Thus we are made different so that we can know our need of one another. And this is a fundamental law of our being. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we flout this law. . . . We must act now and wake up to our moral obligations. . . . We need to be accountable to God's family. Once we start living in a way that is people-friendly to all of God's family, we will also be environment-friendly. (*The Green Bible* 1–12)

His comments propose ideas about human animality: humans are social and different from one another by God's design, and their social orientation implies universal moral obligations not restricted to human-designated domains such as ethnicity or nation. In addition, he suggests that greater responsiveness to our moral obligations to God's family of

diverse human beings will result in improvements to the environment. Tutu's ideas about human animality forward the possibility that reconciliation to God, one another, and all of God's creation can be achieved.

Walker and Butler also have a human-sensitive outlook on ecological issues based in presumptions about human animality, yet they diverge from endorsing Christianity as the best religious response. At the same time, their work suggests religion is crucial to positive ecological change. Their respective notions of human animality inform their depictions of religion capable of stemming the tide of ecological crisis. In sum, Walker's ecotheology pushes human beings to reconnect to their animality through deeper relationships with nonhuman animals and the Earth. Butler's perspective on human animality yields an ecotheology that aims to help humans surpass their negative tendencies in order to survive on whatever planet they should inhabit. In this chapter, I use Walker's essays[5] and Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (PS) and *Parable of the Talents* (PT) to demonstrate the unique character of each author's ecotheological creativity.

Both authors were raised in devout, Christian homes that afforded them a high level of biblical literacy. They take this knowledge and contribute to the tradition of African American biblical engagement and critical evaluations of Christianity in creative writing. "African American writers have always evoked and manipulated Christian discourse for social analysis and protest, for variously oriented (profane as well as spiritual) reflection on fundamental existential questions, for literary representation of black identity formation, and for enrichment of artistic expression" (Valkeakari 2), yet religion stands out in their work as something that complicates but may also improve ecological relationships. Butler and Walker use Christian and other religious discourse as a means to transform the negative human behaviors that have resulted in endangered human and nonhuman life. Their work supports the existential question: how might religion advance sustainability? As writers, they create distinct religious visions that suggest answers to this question and fictionalize possible solutions. They affirm religion's role in promoting radical ecological change. Both authors offer commentary and characters that demonstrate the possibility that religion may elicit the thought and action necessary to rescue human beings from themselves.

The respective religious orientations of both authors can be seen in their biblical hermeneutic. Their ecotheological creativity relies on the Bible, yet they use it to create quite different results. Walker gravitates

toward the figure of Jesus, a loving advocate for the downtrodden and representative of the best of human spirit. The harsh and jealous vision of God that some readers of the Hebrew Scriptures perceive is fitting for Butler's scientific realism. Although both find aspects of the Bible useful for ecotheological synthesis, Butler and Walker depict Christianity, as it is currently practiced, as having a future antithetical to sustainability. They make up for these perceived shortcomings by synthesizing their interpretation of biblical and nonbiblical religious resources.

A world with multilingual and multicultural neighborhoods, gated communities, gross class divisions, multiethnic people, crumbling nation-state influence, corporate cities, debt and corporate slavery, and religious extremism is the setting for Butler's *Parable* novels. Lauren Olamina fights desperately to cope with what Terence Martin rightly identifies as the "manifest difficulty" of "exhaustible resources" and obsolete dreams (Martin xi). As a fifteen-year-old African American girl living in the United States of the 2020s and 2030s, Lauren offers an "interruption in the dominant cultural hermeneutical spin" (Wimbush 38) by using her Bible as a desk and writing her own religion. This interruption goes beyond the dominant cultural hermeneutical spin to create not only an extrabiblical religion but also a theology and religious culture that is compatible with the continuation of a species that constantly endangers itself: human beings.

To stress the potential of religious and scientific syncretism, Butler juxtaposes Lauren's amalgam of religious and scientific thought with characters who illustrate the perils of practicing religion without critical thought. Mrs. Sims is a distant, "sanctimonious" elder in the Robledo community who "believed in a literal acceptance of everything in the Bible." Yet this stalwart interpretation of the Bible does not stop her from committing suicide and in Lauren's words "trad[ing] pain now for eternal pain in the hereafter" (PS 23).[6] Mrs. Sims's inability to read the Bible critically leads her to alienate others; the isolation violates her "animal/human" need for social interaction and results in her presuicide despair. Robert Moss, a neighbor of the Olaminas, "put[s] together his own religion–a combination of Old Testament and historical West African practices [and] claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible" (PS 36). Moss does not survive the destruction of Robledo and serves as an example of failed ecotheological synthesis. Lauren holds her father in high esteem, yet, by the

second journal entry she declares, "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church" (PS 7). It does not seem as though Laurence Olamina's version of Christianity suffers the patriarchal quagmire that Moss's use of the Bible does, yet Lauren explains that someone "poured gasoline in and around [his church] and burned it down." This fire symbolizes the limitations of Lauren's father's theology. While she believes her father is "the best person [she] know[s]," she also believes "he has his blind spots" (PS 54). Although Laurence Olamina embodies the compatibility of both religiosity and critical thinking in his roles of university professor and church leader, he is just another example of how Christianity does not equip its followers to think critically enough to sustain humanity. "Christian America" is successful in uniting religion with political goals during the U.S. presidency of Andrew Jarrett; however, the depiction of its followers–most important, Lauren's brother Marcos (who apparently cannot express his sexuality openly as a Christian America leader)–leaves little promise that it will have the intellectual and spiritual strength to transform existence. Indeed, Asha reveals that her adoptive parents, Christian America followers, inculcated her into a religious culture of "stupid faith" that did not allow "thinking and questioning" (PT 239).

In the context of the *Parable* novels, these insufficiently ecumenical Christians are unable to combine their Christian beliefs with other religions and ways of thinking that are beneficial to their survival. Earthseed stands in stark contrast to these varied depictions of Christianity. Instead of the "stupid faith" of Christian America, Earthseed "Gathering Day" sermons leave time for attendees to offer "questions, challenges, [and] argument" (PT 145). Literacy training and the idea of "teaching the teachers" also serve as companions to Earthseed's emphasis on critical thinking. This focus on critical thinking instead of faith as the core of Earthseed means that while Lauren's Christian upbringing can be seen as a primary religious impetus for Earthseed, it is also a point of departure, in keeping with Butler's approach to the Bible in previous texts. "Ultimately Butler's appropriation of the Bible is meant to subvert it where it is perverse, embrace it where it is cogent, and finally to substitute for it a personal scripture, indeed, a theology, of her own" (Pfeiffer 141). This scriptural substitution can be read in Butler's choice to write over Christian theological perspectives with Earthseed theology. For instance, rather than the concept of an unchanging God in Christian traditions, in Earthseed,

God is change itself. The beginning of the first chapter of *Parable of the Sower* reads, "All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God is Change" (3). Rather than an everlasting life in heaven, the destiny of Earthseed believers is to take advantage of developments in interstellar travel and "to take root among the stars" (PT 249). Other tenets of Earthseed include "shaping" God, persisting, "embracing diversity" (in its many forms), regular communal meeting, continuous learning, partnering (in its many forms), and critical acting and thinking in order to achieve a kind of "species life insurance" (PT 352). Lauren explains, "Earthseed is about preparing to fulfill the Destiny. It's about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment. It's about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are" (PT 322). The extraterrestrial aims of Earthseed may appear antiecological to some, but ecology does not imply that Earth is the only possible home. By negotiating her religious inheritance (i.e., Christianity) with her belief in the value of scientific inquiry, Lauren forges a religion that she feels meets the goal of sustainable partnership with our environment even if that environment is extraterrestrial.

By contrast, Walker's vision assumes that Earth is the only viable home for humans. Her body of work suggests that religion can be a resource that humans live sustainably within this earthly home. However, a concentrated and extended critique of Christianity and the Bible comes in Walker's book *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism.* It is in the essay, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms): Clearly Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming the Pagan Self," where Walker describes paganism as an oppressed aspect of African American religious heritage:

> We have been beggars at the table of a religion [i.e., Christianity] that sanctioned our destruction. Our [African Americans'] own religions denied, forgotten; our own ancestral connections to All Creation something of which we are ashamed. I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led. (*Anything* 25)

Walker's assessment that racist ideology and enslavement are evidence of the ways Christianity sanctioned [the] destruction of African Americans is put alongside a critique of the Bible's contents within its original context. For instance, part of her argument celebrating the value she sees in paganism is to debunk Moses: one of the most revered figures of the ancient biblical and contemporary Africana world. She pinpoints Numbers 31, which tells of the God-sanctioned suppression of the Midianite people. Rather than simply being explained as an Israelite liberator and a law giver, Moses can be read as someone who gives orders to subjugate brutally his very own wife's people, leaving the Midianite females that remain to be "sex slaves, concubines, and drudges in the services of soldiers and priests" (*Anything* 22). Walker goes on to expand her critique of the Bible's contents by suggesting that women's voices and roles are insignificant, that circumcision is a superfluous and dangerous requirement, and that the order to kill people with a "familiar spirit" (i.e., nonheterosexuals) is indefensible. Ultimately, Walker contends that the Bible is a theologically faulty book, and by extension so is Christianity's practice in the New World.

Despite being critical of its contents, Butler and Walker do not discount the Bible as a resource in their alternative ecotheological imaginary. They find it necessary to synthesize elements from different traditions to adequately negotiate the intersection of religiosity and sustainability. In the chapter epigraph, Butler's protagonist makes a clear break with her biblical training; however, she admits that the book of Job, with its depiction of an unkind, demanding God, has great insight into the nature of theology itself. Likewise, Walker's vision of "Mother Earth" as a loving God goes on to identify Jesus of Nazareth as an exemplary example. In their writings, both fiction and nonfiction, these authors find the Bible to be partially adequate to address necessary changes in human behavior to ensure a future for human beings.

Walker explains that her childhood exposed her to both the theological shortcomings and advantages of the Bible. She speaks lovingly of the black church where she was raised and contributes to its survival because of the respect she has for its elderly members.[7] She details through a communal perspective the value to be found in the Bible:

> Sometimes there were wonderful stories: Daniel in the Lion's Den. The Three Wise Men. David and Goliath. The Life of Christ. (Everybody loved Jesus Christ. We recognized him as one of us, but a rebel and revolutionary,

> consistently speaking up for the poor, the sick, and the discriminated against, and going up against the bossmen: the orthodox Jewish religious leaders and rich men of his day. We knew that people who were really like Jesus were often lynched. I liked his gift for storytelling. I also loved that, after Moses and Joshua, he is the greatest magician in the Bible. He was also, I realized later, a fabulous masseur, healing by the power of touch and the laying-on of hands. Much later still I learned he could dance! This quote from the Acts of John, from the Gnostic Gospels, is worth remembering: "To the Universe belongs the dancer. He who does not dance does not know what happens. Now if you follow my dance, see yourself in me.") (*Anything* 18)

In the community of Walker's childhood, the biblical stories that resonated emboldened people to work against discrimination and economic oppression. Walker witnesses her mother mirroring the moral example of Jesus in her belief that "every child is precious and each one must be sheltered, instructed in whatever broadens his or her appreciation of life, and physically fed, without question" (*Anything* xiii). Despite the Bible's shortcomings, it serves as a resource for Walker and her elders.

Butler finds rhetorical value in Jesus's recorded words. She employs the King James Version of what are commonly called the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5–8) and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) to stress that Earthseed followers must embody the two themes of the biblical parables, persistence and resourcefulness, respectively–if they are to achieve Earthseed's interstellar aim. Butler illustrates these two parables' central themes and the revolutionary function of the form itself in her novels about Lauren and those around her; however, Lauren–unlike Jesus of Nazareth, who uses an oral mode of transmitting his message (with modern readers accessing the biblical record of this)–is a religious leader heavily invested in the liberatory potential of writing and scribal literacy.

Like the Synoptic Gospel writers' recollections of Jesus of Nazareth, Butler's *Parable* novels follow Lauren through the early stages of her religious leadership to her death. Using the parable in scribal and oral modes, respectively, both Lauren and Jesus of Nazareth are teacher-leaders of a radical message that promises to upset old beliefs. Naveh writes, "[Jesus] aims to create a new mythology based on a new ideology. . . . The parabolic speech attributed to Jesus clearly aims to replace a set of functioning metaphors that belong to one hermeneutic order by a set of new metaphors belonging to a 'new order.' As the leader of a new religious order, Jesus was clearly not interested in uncovering 'a truth hidden since the

beginning of the world,' but in replacing the old religious order with his own" (70). Boucher reiterates, "One of the most important points to understand about the parables is that they present a challenge. Their message is indeed radical, and is not easily ignored. The hearer of a parable can hardly remain neutral, but must accept or reject its point, must act or fail to act on the lesson" (16). Lauren's purpose, challenging a seemingly irreversible pattern of human behavior, suits the cataclysmic potential of the parable. As Bankole, Lauren's husband and the father of her child, explains, "Earthseed is [Lauren] Olamina's contribution to what she feels should be a species-wide effort to evade, or at least lengthen the specialize-grow-die evolutionary cycle that humanity faces, that every species faces" (PT 48). To break this specialize-grow-die evolutionary cycle, Lauren feels that human beings must make difficult sacrifices. Her love for her species encourages her to spread her belief system in order to make "extrasolar" gains. For Lauren, scientific advancement, in this case, an inevitable era of extraterrestrial human life, is dependent on religion.

The subject of human animality is central to their religious visions. Misconceptions about human animality have formed the basis of imperialist expansion, racist ideology, individual action, and public policy for centuries, with people of African descent bearing numerous negative consequences. Since ideas about human animality have been central to African Americans' ecological burden, it is crucial that people of African descent are heard in current discussions about human animality. Standing at the crossroads of ecology and religion, African American authors such as Butler and Walker have the opportunity to reconfigure the rhetoric of animality in ways that are possibly accurate and beneficial and, if nothing else, thought provoking. The conceptual framework in which Butler ponders human animality, religion, and ecology is science; Walker uses the framework of spirit.

Like "the 150 religious heads and scientists who gathered for the Mission to Washington in May of 1992," Butler's *Parable* novels support the idea that "science and religion, working together, have an essential contribution to make toward any significant mitigation and resolution of the world environmental crisis" (Joint Appeal 735). Butler's particular combination of religion and science identifies aspects of human animality that have contributed to an unsustainable world and suggests ways around these shortcomings. She is adamant that "we might be able to stop ourselves from behaving in certain ways if we could learn to curb some of

our biological urges" (McCaffery 63). She delves into what she sees as "two competing or conflicting characteristics" in need of "curb[ing]"; in an interview with Larry McCaffery, she comments,

> Intelligence [is one of these characteristics] and hierarchical behavior, simple one-upmanship the other. Since the tendency toward hierarchical behavior is older and more entrenched–you can trace it all through the animal species of this planet and into the plants, too, in some ways–hierarchical behavior is self-sustaining and more in charge of the intellect than it should be. Whenever we look at the degree to which our behavior is predetermined genetically–and this is where sociobiology comes into play–we get hung up on who's got the biggest or the best or the most, on who's inferior and who's superior. (McCaffery 63)

Slavery demonstrates the shortcomings of this aspect of human animality laid bare. It is an extreme example of what Butler suggests is the human tendency toward hierarchy. In *Parable of the Talents*, the seventeen-month enslavement of Acorn residents and others by an extremist wing of CA called Jarret's Crusaders (who rename Acorn "Camp Christian") is the most extensive look at slavery in the two texts (although the phenomenon of debt slavery is mentioned early in *Parable of the Sower*). Jarret's Crusaders consider Earthseed a "cult" of "devil-worshiping hill heathens who take in children" and enslave Acorn members, seeking to "deprogram" them and convert them to Christianity. The captors exact physical and sexual exploitation of the enslaved and practice a rigid interpretation of the Bible that certainly would not endorse the kind of religious and scientific syncretism and acceptance of human diversity embodied in Earthseed. For instance, Mary and Allie, a lesbian Earthseed-believing couple, face a betrayal with horrible consequences. Two Acorn members succumb to Camp Christian's weekly doctrinal inundation and report the lesbian couple after a sermon on "the evils of sexual sinfulness" in which homosexuality is categorized with "the evil, depraved wickedness of bestiality, incest, pedophilia . . . pornography, masturbation, prostitution, and adultery" (PT 223). Mary and Allie are lashed electronically so severely that Mary dies. Although Lauren's writing cannot save one of Earthseed's believers from death at the hands of their enslavers, it does outlast Jarret's Crusaders' attempts to obliterate critical thinking and new religious thought among Lauren and Earthseed followers. Lauren's determination

to write throughout the enslavement underscores the connection between literacy and liberation.

Lauren and a few other Acorn members survive over a year of enslavement and break free from their captors after a violent storm provides an opportunity for revolt. Her success reunites her, briefly, with her daughter, Asha (whose original name was Larkin), taken away from her during her enslavement. By the end of the sequel, narrated by Lauren's daughter, Asha is caring for the ailing Marcus, who is still committed to the Christian American cause. Lauren, who reaches the mature age of eighty-one, is resolute in what she has accomplished with her religious teachings. Her last journal entry reveals Lauren to be a biological mother who is frustrated that her daughter was "stolen" by her brother and a religious mother who is pleased that she has had the opportunity to make the truth real and "[give] it substance." Her final journal entry begins and ends with the same sentence: "I know what I've done" (PT 364). Lauren has acted as an ecotheologian combining what she sees as the strengths of religion and science.

The Bible remains an important source of wisdom literature for Lauren and her followers, yet Earthseed hinges on believers who use their intelligence to think critically. For Lauren, "faith" (i.e., belief in things unseen) has no place in a religion capable of ensuring survival. Her new religion must be formulated on "incontrovertible evidence," things seen, tested, proven, and tested again. At the same time, Butler cautions, "Intelligence may indeed be a short-term adaptation, something that works well now but will eventually prove to be a kind of destructive overspecialization that destroys us" (McCaffery 63). Just as intelligence needs the guiding hand of religion, religion serves no purpose if it becomes dogma that gets in the way of human survival on Earth.

Although the conclusion of *Parable of the Sower* sets the stage for a sequel that continues in the American Northwest, the outset of the book fictionalizes one of the principal ideas of Butler's ecological outlook: human beings have to be better skilled at interrelating with one another, no matter what their physical environment ends up being. In an interview, Butler comments,

> I think we humans need to *grow up*,[8] and the best thing we can do for the species is to go out into space. I was very happy to read that it's unlikely there's

> life on Mars or anywhere else in this solar system. That means, if we survive, we have a whole solar system to grow up in. And we can use the stresses of learning to travel in space and live elsewhere–stresses that will harness our energies until we've had time to mature. Not that we won't continue to do terrible things, but we'll be doing them to ourselves rather than to some unfortunate aliens. (McCaffery 69–70)

Likewise, Lauren is committed to the idea that "space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us" (PS 20). Lauren's attitude may sound unlikely in the writing of an author who has been concerned with the topic of enslavement, a tool of centuries of colonization. However, Butler's ecological insight is not Earth-bound, and this is reflected in Lauren's thoughts as well. Lauren comments, "Preparing for interstellar travel and then sending out ships filled with colonists is bound to be a job so long, thankless, expensive, and difficult that I suspect that only a religion could do it. . . . But it will take something as essentially human and as essentially irrational as religion to keep them focused and keep it going" (PT 323). The *Parable* novels use religion to encourage the maturity necessary to survive regardless of the environment in which human beings find themselves. Lauren adopts the Mars astronaut Alicia Catalina Godinez Leal as a model for herself as she prepares herself for a possible extraterrestrial reality that has the power to sidestep the ecological problems that have "made such a hell of life here on Earth" (PS 21).

Butler remarks, "I knew I wanted [Lauren] to be a leader . . . and I knew I wanted her to create this religion. And I knew that I wanted her not to be some sort of hypocrite or crazy person or a crook. I really wanted to avoid those clichés that we tend to use on people who create religions" (McHenry 16). As a religious leader, Lauren has "imperfections and personal idiosyncrasies that make her human" (Jablon 157), yet she is learned enough to combine elements commonly understood as disparate, if not incompatible: religious traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism with "biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and . . . the second law of thermodynamics" (PT 47–48). Additionally, Lauren's depiction of how the religion is formed mirrors scientific method. She comments, "I've never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation. . . . All I do is observe and take notes" (PS 71). An ecotheology, Earthseed "synthesizes" the historical depth, literary richness, and accumulated

astuteness in the founding teachings of established religions with the responsiveness to change and the logical thinking of scientific inquiry.

Walker does not directly endorse scientific inquiry; however, her essays reveal an understanding of human animality with concepts such as goodness, love, and imperfection at its core. Unlike Butler's somber analysis of human tendencies, Walker's observations are driven by a romantic "delight in human beings" (*Anything* xxii). She also writes, "I believe the Earth is good. That people, untortured by circumstance or fate, are also good. I do not believe the people of the world are naturally my enemies, or that animals, including snakes, are, or that Nature is" (*Anything* xxv). She is unapologetically optimistic about the human capacity to live in a peace-filled manner with positive relationships among themselves and with Earth and its other inhabitants. Mark I. Wallace's concept of "sustainable spirituality" is an apt description of this aspect of Walker's theology. He describes this as "a nonsectarian spiritual vision concerning the deep interrelationships of all life-forms on the planet and the concomitant ethical ideal of preserving the integrity of these relationships through one's social and political praxis" (Wallace 597). In contrast to Butler's core of science, Walker champions animistic notions of spirit, which promises to be a vehicle to improve "the integrity of . . . relationships" among elements of the natural world.

Walker's optimism and basic belief in the goodness of humanity is tempered by her belief in human imperfection. She writes, "It is the awareness of having faults . . . and the knowledge that this links us to everyone on earth, that opens us to courage and compassion. It occurs to me often that many of those I deeply love *are* flawed. . . . But it is their struggle with the flaw, surprisingly endearing, *and the going on anyhow*, that is part of what I cherish in them" (*Anything* xxv). One of her recurring examples of how flawed humans can nevertheless embody the goodness and love she also attributes to humans is former Cuban President Fidel Castro. Her essay, "I Call That Man Religious, Healing the Universal Heart: Becoming Intimate with That Which Is Foreign" (given as a speech to the College of Integral Studies in 2002), celebrates Castro as a "truly religious man" because "he has consistently articulated, affirmed and actively defended the aspirations of the poor" (*We Are the Ones* 115). While she acknowledges that Castro is an atheist, she sees a "Jesuit scholar and social-activist lawyer" as aspects of his identity as well, calling him "a person of immense spiritual power" (*Anything* 193). Indicative of her Earth-based orientation, Walker

uses as a religious measuring stick the political leader's accomplishments on behalf of disenfranchised members of the human community.

Like Butler's novels, Walker's essays provide a window into her religious vision through the subject of enslavement. Slavery demonstrates the fact that human beings can drift far from the love and goodness at their core. It is an extreme example of what she believes is the human fact of imperfection that can affect nonhuman members of the ecological community. In the essay "Am I Blue?" Walker revisits her childhood love of horses and the subject of enslavement through the loneliness of a siring horse named Blue left by itself for long periods of time in a field next to a property she rents. After she bonds with the horse she recalls, "I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well; if we are brought up around animals as children we take this for granted. By the time we are adults we no longer remember" (*Living by the Word* 5). Yet Blue prompts Walker to reflect on enslaved African Americans and those experiencing other oppressions. She concludes, "People like me [are those] who have forgotten, and daily forget, all that animals try to tell us. 'Everything you do to us will happen to you; we are your teachers, as you are ours. We are one lesson' is essentially it I think" (*Living by the Word* 7). By extending the concept of enslavement to nonhuman animals, Walker invites her readers to ponder a didactic reciprocity among the Earth's inhabitants. Ecological lessons that mirror Walker's religious focus on the human potential for goodness come from the plant world as well. In "My Daughter Smokes," she writes, "Perhaps we can liberate tobacco from those who have captured and abused it, enslaving the plant on large plantations, keeping it from freedom and its kin, and forcing it to enslave the world. Its true nature suppressed, no wonder it has become deadly. Maybe sowing a few seeds of tobacco in our gardens and treating the plant with the reverence it deserves, we can redeem the tobacco's soul and restore its self-respect" (*Living by the Word* 123–24). Here the Christian language of redemption combines with a paganistic reverence for the plant world. By applying a liberation theology to both the tobacco plant and a horse, Walker encourages readers to think seriously about the relationships they form with nonhuman nature. In these relationships she feels human beings can express religiosity–in this case, an interest in helping the disenfranchised.

A paganist perspective on judgment emanates from Walker's aesthetic, which often blurs the distinctions among Earth, humans, plants,

and nonhuman animals. Supporting the ideas of interconnectedness and kinship, Walker warns in her essay "Everything Is a Human Being," "We are judged by our worst collective behavior, since it is so vast; not by our singular best. The Earth holds us responsible for our crimes against it, not as individuals, but as a species. . . . *And how hard it will be to change our worst behavior!*" (*Living by the Word* 142). Acknowledging that her spiritual exemplars "were often sexist, prone to war, [and] humanly flawed," Walker nevertheless turns to Native American leaders such as Black Elk to guide what she believes is a most necessary and difficult change in behavior, writing, "Everything to the Indian was a relative. Everything was a human being" (*Living by the Word* 151). Rather than an exclusionary anthropocentricism that places humans above other nonhuman earth dwellers, this concept of everything being human is imbued by the idea of spirit: a force that allows human beings to recognize their reliance on and responsibility to the nonhuman world. When human beings act out of an awareness of this interconnectedness, they are understood to be acting spiritually. For Walker, who embraces paganism, this is good religion.

Walker's recognition of spirit and optimistic vision of human animality allows for a broad understanding of religious activity. Her spiritual optimism about human animality suggests that religion and religious activity can make humans more aware of their interconnectedness with each other and nonhumans and put an end to the destruction of the Earth. Butler's grave, "scientific realism" about human tendencies, on the other hand, puts religion in a mediating role, one in which it may quell the self-sabotaging aspects of humans' animal nature. Her protagonist in the *Parable* novels suggests that a belief system of religious influence and scientifically discovered truths can help transform the grim realities of human history into the promise of a future. Earthseed synthesizes scientific knowledge, theology, and critical thinking with the idea that this future may have to unfold on another planet.

Conclusion: Religious Models

Octavia Butler and Alice Walker are not representatives of a defined religious community; however, they do "articulate the ethical and spiritual dimensions of modern issues" that Gary T. Gardner suggests is necessary "to developing a new understanding of human progress in the 21st century" (166). Their willingness to rethink human progress through the

prism of religion provides important models: of ecotheological religions themselves and, perhaps more important, of the process of thinking critically about human nature. Butler and Walker fictionalize people who seek out religion just as they represent critical and imaginative thinking about religion themselves. As Lynn White Jr. notes, "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (12); Butler and Walker, through their characters and themselves, find new ecotheology by rethinking Christianity. As a result, they represent the act of religious questing grounded in critical and creative thinking.

For instance, Madelyn Jablon argues that the metafictional aspects of Butler's work transform science fiction "by introducing inquiry and commentary about standard practices, formulas, and norms" (165). Butler's metafictional choice to embed the novels in acts of writing and reading encourages the growth of one of Earthseed's major tenets in her readers: critical thinking. These novels have numerous narrative strains that compel readers not only to imagine a story of an emerging religion but also to think critically about the religion's contents and the way the story is told, leaving the impression that the novels contain truth but in no way represent the only truths to be gained.

As an example, Butler makes a departure in writing *Parable of the Talents* that unifies the series's parabolic rhetorical core and its messages about literacy, liberation, scientific thought, and religion. With her choice to use the narrative voice of Asha Vere, Lauren's daughter, Butler invokes the kind of critical literacy that Lauren wishes to cultivate with her religion. *Parable of the Sower* unfolds through excerpts of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* and Lauren's journals; readers rely on Lauren to understand her world. *Parable of the Talents* includes both of those narrative vehicles and excerpts from *Memories of Other Worlds*, a text written by Taylor Franklin Bankole (Lauren's husband) and *Warrior*, a text written by Marcos Duran (Lauren's half-brother)—all intertwined by Asha's narrative segments. With this narrative multiplication, the novel embodies the kind of critical literacies Lauren's Earthseed ministry advocates. It encourages readers to see Lauren as a religious leader with human shortcomings and invites multiple interpretations of events, undercutting the dogmatic potential of Earthseed and giving readers space to develop conclusions not entirely dependent on text written by Lauren. This intensifies the efficacy of Butler's

creation: scribally focused parables with several entry points for readers to seriously consider the development of a religion and a religious language. Just like enslaved Africans reading against "traditional Bible literacy" that imposed uncritical acceptance of status quo biblical interpretations, Butler highlights the importance of individual interpretation at the same time as she tells the story of a female-authored religion responsive to ecological crisis.

Crucial to Butler's creation of Lauren and Walker's endorsement of paganism is critical thinking about human animality: If we are animals, what kind of beings are we? What does this mean for human survival and ecological health? Both women explore these questions about human animality knowing speculations and pseudoscience about this topic have been used to marginalize sectors of the human species: Africans, women, the indigenous, nonhetereosexuals. Yet the history of misuse of the rhetoric of animality does not limit their ability to use human animality as the catalyst for their ecotheological visions. Both authors' conclusions come to rest firmly in ecological beauty. Butler and Walker conclude, in their respective fashions, that some aspect of humanness will mean that the continuation of the human species is possible. Their writing also points out both the burdensome aspects of human animality and the potential beauty of finding religious responses to forestall or eliminate the impact of these burdens.

Their thinking about human animality, religion, and ecology reveal two different courses: one that suggests religion can intervene and save life on planet Earth (Walker); the other that warns humans must learn how to better relate for the inevitable era of extraterrestrial life (Butler).

As critical thinkers who respect and represent the process of finding an adequate ecotheology, Butler and Walker prompt evaluation of their ideas and those of their characters: Is Lauren's steely theological perspective enough to inspire real humans instead of just the characters in Butler's novels? What do Lauren's ideas imply for nonhuman species? Are Walker's ideas about human animality too rosy to confront the harsh ecological realities on Earth? Can the nonindigenous practice paganism without the infringements of appropriation? Might neo-paganism be a sound pairing with bioregionalism? Could the reactions to new ecotheologies on the part of religious fundamentalists in the *Parable* novels be indicative of the hostility such ecotheology might face in our current world? I infer that

questions like these are fruitful byproducts of Octavia Butler's and Alice Walker's work that bring the subjects of religion, human animality, and sustainability to the page. Their human-sensitive ecotheological musings leave readers with possible answers to these questions, but, more importantly, models of the activity of continued inquiry.

FOUR

Bones and Water

Telling on Myth

Read myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people's myths. . . . If you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive.

–Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (1988)

Aba, I consecrate my bones.
Take my soul up and plant it again.
Your will shall be my hand.
When I strike you strike.
My eyes shall see only thee.
I shall set my brother free.
Aba, this bone is thy seal.

–"Headeye," "Ark of Bones" by Henry Dumas (1970)

When I was eight my grandfather took me hunting for wild turkey. Once out of the city he was alert to any human movement, saying that if the rednecks found you alone, there was no telling what might happen, or more to the point, it was far too predictable what would happen.

–"Robert Hawks," *Watershed*, Percival Everett (1996)

Call: A Time for Myth?

Right now, myth might seem superfluous in a hierarchy of ecological needs. Given the material complexity of our ecological condition, academic discourse in the hard sciences may seem more urgent than myth. Even ecocritics have suggested that literature and criticism of it must reflect scientific understanding, if it is to speak to the moment. Glen Love,

in his chapter "Ecocriticism and Science," makes a convincing argument that ecoliterary study benefits from an in-depth knowledge of the life sciences, making the claim that "scientifically informed ecocritics have an opportunity to reinvigorate the teaching and study of literature and to help redirect literary criticism into a more consequential social and public role" (64). Although Love's aim to give literary scholarship greater usefulness in the public sphere is laudable, his unmitigated prescription of more science may overlook science's limitations and literature's strong points. If ecological progress is our concern, we may indeed ask, is scientific knowledge or method always beneficial?

David Suzuki suggests there are limits to the benefits of science and technology. He writes, "These days, many people believe that science and technology provide us with the understanding and tools to manage nature and to find solutions to problems that science and technology have helped to create. Technology provides powerful but crude instruments for very straightforward activities. But science fragments the way we see the world, so we have no context within which to see what impact our activities and technological applications have" (211). Presumably, shoring up science's fragmented nature with other disciplines and modes of discourse is possible, yet Suzuki's point suggests that there may be insight to be gained from understanding and talking about the world in ways that are not science centered. Even if mythic images begin in scientific discourse, they do not remain there; they gain momentum and power via vernacular discussion and artistic renderings. Suzuki also notes, "Myths help us to reconcile conflicts and contradictions and describe a coherent reality. They make a meaning that holds the group together and express a set of beliefs; even in our skeptical society, we live by myths that lie so deep we believe them to be reality" (185). Our use of language is necessary to "begin to reconnect ourselves to everything on Earth, re-creating a complete worldview" (214).

While the interdisciplinary influence of science is helpful, our interconnectedness within the natural world is ready-made for archetype, the domain of the verbal arts. Myth often resides at the scientific limits of human understanding about nature, allowing people to address what they do not fully understand but still deem valuable. Myth gives us an aesthetic toolbox by which we attach ourselves to place. It conveys the conceptual complexity of our connection to place, past, present, and future in language. And, although it was certainly part of the past, the activity of myth-making remains unfinished.

Myth as a form of ecological literature has the promise of supplying an outlook that recognizes the past but that also contains a critical and creative assessment of human history and behavior, in particular its overreliance on technological solutions. This kind of ethnogenesis in the age of global climate change may provide new contexts that bring us closer to a sustainable world. In the second epigraph, from Henry Dumas's "Ark of Bones," the character's cited oath reflects a worldview that insists that the natural world can be a way to cope with trauma; myth, in this instance, connects human need with nonhuman nature. The words of the character Robert Hawks in the third epigraph show that encounters with nonhuman nature can leave humans vulnerable to histories of racist myth. Both examples show the need for engaging myths as part of the ecological work Suzuki describes.

Given its powerful influence over human outlook, it would seem that myth would be well-acknowledged among those who study the relationship of literature and ecology, yet existing ecocritical taxonomies rarely include myth, perhaps the ecoliterary tradition with the most distance from modern science. Published in 1996, Thomas J. Lyon's "spectrum" of European American "Writing about Nature" spans "Field Guides and Professional Papers" to "Man's Role in Nature" (278).[1] His spectrum is cast through "three main dimensions . . . : natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (276). Although Lyon acknowledges a "mythic pattern of departure, initiation, and return" as part of one of his categories, "myth" itself does not warrant its own category. Published in 2000, Patrick Murphy's taxonomy of "nature-oriented literature" delineates several "modes and genres" and "structural features." In addition, Murphy's description's multicultural starting point makes the crucial point that "to speak . . . of an American nature-oriented literature, we must recognize that ancient oral, tribal forms of . . . storytelling continue to exist and influence contemporary literary production, particularly but not exclusively by Native American authors" (*Farther Afield* 2–3). Indeed, the oldest (and perhaps the newest) myths about land in North America come from peoples who have had the longest relationship with the land. Although acknowledged by Murphy, these indigenous myths are largely outside both theorists' critical purview. That is, while existing ecoliterary surveys provide insight into major ecoliterary patterns, they have barely registered myth's impact.

I address this absence by offering an ecocritical reading of mythic literature rooted in the lives of African Americans.

Early African Americans (located largely in the U.S. South) cried out for myths that would address their desire for ecological belonging against the context of geographic and cultural change. They were a newly designated people in a New World who needed new myths. As Jane Campbell writes in *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History*, "For Afro-American writers, whose ancestors were wrenched from their native country, enslaved, and forced to subscribe to damaging notions about themselves and their heritage, the creation of a distinct mythology has been almost essential to the artistic process. . . . Myths, by definition, voice a culture's most profound perceptions, and, when given fictional form, can awaken the audience's strongest impulses" (Campbell ix). Although mythological traditions often come directly from indigenous, long-standing relationships to land, they also come from communities that have faced relatively recent geographic change. Campbell's description reiterates that myth's importance does not diminish in the face of geographic displacement and exploitation.

African Americans' history of displacement and exploitation brings two facets of myth to bear in this chapter's iteration of ecological beauty and burden. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the first facet of myth as "a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon." This definition pertains to the beauty of verbal art that connects people with themselves and the world around them. This type of myth links people with a particular locale or explains a particular group ethos. Like the metaphors discussed in Daniel J. Philippon's *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement*, myths provide a trove of images that are "not only descriptive but also constructive and productive. They help to create meaning and reality and to produce certain effects" (17). Lyle Eslinger explains, "Myths are cognitive maps by which we attempt to order an apparently chaotic world and universe. Myths are stories that we remember about what our world is, how it came to be, how we came to be, what we want from it, and finally about what our future might be. . . . Myths emerge from human need and express our inextricable biological rootage in the world" (1). As mythmakers, African Americans consolidated ideas about their group identity and connection with not only America but also Africa and its diaspora. Their myths serve the constructive function of positive

group identity and create meaning and reality based in a connection to place, and they sustain and propel African Americans through difficult circumstances.

The second facet of myth is defined as "a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth. Also: something existing only in myth; a fictitious or imaginary person or thing" (OED). Myth can also be a way of naming lies–untruths–and with that definition in mind, we can understand African Americans as being subject to an onslaught of destructive myths. Racist ideologies that supported enslavement and subsequent discrimination yielded burdensome myths reflective of this meaning of myth. These myths destroy the truth with obfuscating, barely human images of people of African descent. "Myths also tell us that something went badly wrong, that we humans have been exiled from home, ousted from the garden" (Suzuki 185). At the service of nation making, imperialism, and exclusionary group identity, destructive myths demonstrate the ways in which pseudo- and nonscientific modes of discourse have ecological impacts that equal or surpass those of scientific discourse.

This chapter is a call to investigate both the constructive and destructive functions of myth. Central to this call is the question: What is the value of myth as an aspect of ecological writing, particularly for African Americans, a largely nonindigenous North American group? This is a call to investigate how African American ecoliterature puts concepts of race and myth in place.

Response: Places for Myth

The specificities of place guide this response. Henry Dumas, rooted in the U.S. South until the age of ten, details the beauty of race as indicative of cultural heritage. His characters exist in worlds with a critical mass of African Americans. Even though it is a place of racialized violence and injustice, the U.S. South in Dumas's writing represents the beauty of ancestral connection and communities large enough to support African American identities. Percival Everett explores the burden of racist mythology in the American West, a region identified with the marginalization of indigenous groups and the ascendancy of European Americans. His African American characters are seldom rooted in the large black communities so frequent in the U.S. South. As individuals, they experience race through

the lens of racist whites. The two authors' incorporation of myth coincides with divergent experiences of race and place.

Creating myths in the constructive vein, Dumas's mythology was informed by a cosmopolitan study of the subject and a specific love for his culture. He penned mythological literature for African Americans who needed stories to explain the mixed emotions that connected them to U.S. land, particularly the South. This need did not end with the antebellum formation of African American culture. It continued, as it addressed collective phenomena such as Jim Crow–era segregation, the civil rights movement, and the Great Migration. Predicated on interactions with nonhuman nature and relationships among human beings, his mythology simultaneously grounds his characters and gives them flight as they juggle being natural while they experience institutionalized oppression. Spotlighting institutionalized oppression while affirming his characters' place within nature, Dumas's myths justify African American ecological belonging.

Twenty years after Dumas's untimely and disturbing death,[2] an honorary critical outpouring compiled in the Summer 1988 issue of *Black American Literature Forum*[3] hailed him as a writer who was "one with the land, one with his people, and one with the universe" (Redmond 153). Numerous Dumas critics identify mythology, surrealism, and nature as significant strengths in his work. John Wright explains, "Dumas is engaged in the conscious fabrication, or re-fabrication of myths, an effort to re-mythologize human experience in reaction to the forces of dehumanization" (quoted in Redmond xx). My examination of three of Dumas's stories explains myth's constructive ecological capacity and its ability to build connections among natural elements, even in the face of serious challenge to this connection. Dumas creates myth that helps his characters and readers interrelate humans and the nonhuman natural world, with spirituality and healing at his mythology's core. "Nature, for Dumas, represents the key to restoring our full humanity and our sense of relatedness to each other" (Castro 183). For this reason, Dumas's work mythologizes ecological beauty.

This beauty resonates in Dumas's stories about characters who construct myths out of the ashes of trauma. Deaths in the recent and more distant past are the sources of trauma in the short story "Ark of Bones," about the initiation of a boy who agrees to honor properly the memory of ancestors, especially the victims of racialized violence. The riverbank

where two young boys,[4] Fish-hound and Headeye, encounter one another is called Deadman's Landin. By the end of the story the boys learn that an African American lynching victim was presumed thrown into the river. Even though the river is the resting place of a lynching victim, it has the potential to be a place of redemptive healing from the trauma of racialized violence, with the help of myth.

Fish-hound, who narrates the story, describes Headeye as a peer with exceptional intellectual and spiritual powers whose ugly appearance stems from his large eyes and disproportionate head and body. Headeye's physical appearance symbolizes his visionary skill, complemented by his willingness to be ordained while aboard a large ark designated as a "soulboat" filled with bones and priests. Before the ceremony begins, Fish-hound describes what he sees:

> Bones. I saw bones. They were stacked all the way to the top of the ship. I looked around. The under side of the whole ark was nothing but a great bonehouse. I looked and saw crews of black men handlin in them bones. There was a crew of two or three under every cabin around that ark. Why, there must have been a million cabins. They were doin it very carefully, like they were holdin onto babies or somethin precious. (18)

Analyzing the pervasive image of bones in Dumas's work, George Austin Jones writes, "The word *bone* is synonymous with the multiple foundations of Black knowledge and wisdom which must be nurtured. . . . Dumas warns us to return to the roots and build on the bones of our ancestors through the African Continuum" (In Redmond 266–67). Although Fish-hound does not fully understand the careful handling of bones, he later learns that its significance stems from the fact that the ark is the "house of generations."

The boys in Dumas's story are told that "Every African who lives in America has a part of his soul in this ark" (Dumas 20). A biological understanding of race, in which people retain some physiological connection not only to individual ancestors but also to a larger, geographically designated group (in this story symbolized by bones), transmits itself to a cultural tradition which, although it may change, serves as a resource from which to draw valuable strengths. This river experience in the U.S. South constructs ties to a geographically expansive history that has the potential to address the community's traumatic relationship to "Deadman's Landin." Linking individual stories to a larger story empowers Headeye as an

ecological agent, someone able to negotiate the natural and social order through his openness to the possibility that what is real may also have elements of what is often understood as the mystical. This mythology has the potential to revise his community's connection to the natural landscape and give them power over their traumatic history.

Layers of mythology and history form the African American cultural strengths from which the youth are able to draw: biblical references (Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones; Noah's ark), African American history (slave ships/the Middle Passage, racialized violence), and non-Christian religious practice (voodoo, and the use of a mojo bone). Clyde Taylor celebrates this multiplicity of discourses as related to Dumas's "extraordinary discovery" of nature, which Taylor suggests was found through Dumas "backtreading and reclaiming the sweet and acrid threads of Afro experience, through the blues, Gospel, the Bible, Black country life and mores, into the roots, the soil, until he found himself securely at home in his African person, in the middle of the Mississippi Valley" (In Redmond 356). Taylor also designates Dumas's discovery as extraordinary because of the ecological challenges African Americans have had as a racially marginalized group. Summarizing the result of racism on blacks' ecological outlook, he writes, "A tree lurks in this imagination as something you can be lynched from; a river becomes someplace to dispose your body. At the most, the 'land' is something you can love and live with but never feel as your own" (356–57). But in "Ark of Bones," Dumas supplants these fears with the constructive tenor of his mythic voice. He places the two boys in the story in the wilderness to "return to the roots and build on the bones"; indeed, it is Headeye's "river-rat" knowledge of the natural area that returns him to what readers learn is the ark. Once there, Headeye can confront the conflicted relationship to the nonhuman natural world that his community has endured and heal the trauma of racialized violence and exploitation.

Headeye responds to "God's call," undergoes his "anoint[ing]," and recites the epigraph quoted at this chapter's opening as part of the ceremony. Dumas concludes the story with the image of Headeye leaving the town but promising Fish-hound he will return, perhaps with more tools that will assist his anointed stewardship. Trudier Harris-Lopez writes, "The myth that Dumas creates is one in which black people recognize their oppressions and move beyond them to the possibility of creating something else. . . . Generations upon generations of black people on Western soil must ever

be aware [of the message in 'Ark of Bones']. It is the impetus to redefinition of self, to the claiming of cosmic ties for people of African descent" (*South of Tradition* 143). Dumas turns to the nonhuman natural world as a resource for moving beyond oppressions and articulating cosmic ties. The river gives access to the otherworld of the Ark of Bones. Once Headeye returns from his initiation, he picks up Heyboy, Fish-hound's "no-count dog," as a companion for his next journey. Out of a history of enslavement and a present of racialized violence, Headeye takes a mythic journey and redefines himself as a powerful protector of his people.

"Echo Tree" is another story about two boys in the midst of wilderness moving through an animistic landscape. The nameless characters in the story mirror those of "Ark of Bones": one is entrenched in beliefs that connect him to the natural and supernatural world, and the other is a less enlightened but open-minded skeptic whose brother has passed away and entered into the spirit world said to be lodged in the "echo tree." In this story, Dumas demarcates an adolescent search for mythic meaning through the nonhuman natural world. This kind of myth constructs a gateway to the past–in particular, a deceased brother. This gateway is said to open through a talking echo tree that begins to speak once the sun has "gather[ed] in all the words talked in the daylight," the sun's "butt end" "sit[s] down on [the] mountains," and "catcher-clouds churns [the words] up into echoes" (Dumas 25). After such occurrences take place in the story, Dumas details a nonhuman natural world animated for the purpose of human interpretation:

> Shadows begin to fade into a tinted haze.
> Red Oklahoma clay darkens.
> Green stretches of Arkansas pine finger their way into the land.
> White blotches of clouds edge into open sky, fading into oblivion.
> Orange filaments stream from the sun.
> And blue-red-blue, green-blue, white-blue–all ink the sky.
> Shadows become fingers of wind in the night.
> Shadows take on shapes. They come to breathe.
> And the blue-blue prevails across the heavens, and the weight of the mood is as black as night.
>
> (Dumas 26)

Lush changing colors, shadows, and nonhuman natural activity in this rural landscape signal that "spirits talk, 'n they take you places" (23). In

addition, the mythically inclined member of the pair suggests that listening to spirits talk through the nonhuman natural world will allay the "taint" of urbanization. He explains that "Taintin is when you just feel tired, you don't want to do nothing, you can't laugh, and your breathin get slow" (28). This is part of the process of becoming a "bino," defined as "anything or anybody that curse the echo tree and whichever spirit is restin there" (25). The color symbolism of albinism and "turnin white" (25) in this story suggests that urban life encourages a rejection of ancestral connection and a negation of nonhuman natural power.

Although the story focuses on adolescents who may either be involved in imaginative play or distant from a complete grasp of the adult community's beliefs, it supports an animistic worldview with anthropomorphic descriptions of the environment. Dumas writes,

> Shhhwssss! The small valley seems to heave, and the sounds come from the earth and the red tip of its tongue. And then a harmonic churning swells up and up! and as the ink-clouds press in on the sun, a motion in the sky, a flash of lightning, a sudden shift of the cloud, churns up, and a speck of sunlight spits out to the Shhhwssss! of the spirited air, and the ears of the boys hear and the sounds are voices–remade, impregnated–screaming out to the world. . . . Wide-mouthed, one boy cannot speak now. He stands near the spot of the tree. He seems ready to run. (29–30)

Ultimately, the less knowledgeable boy yields to the pleas of his friend and begins the "callin words for spirit-talk" (24) that can help him communicate with the echo tree. The story concentrates on the development of belief in myth; however, it also affirms the myth's power with the conclusion, "*And in the wind it is whispered to the ear of the hearer. . . . The sun will rise tomorrow*" (30). This concluding message reifies the human desire to negotiate a position between natural and supernatural understandings of the world. Dumas's story echoes Paula Gunn Allen's contention in "The Woman I Love Is a Planet; The Planet I Love Is a Tree." She writes, "The planet, our mother, Grandmother Earth, is *physical* and therefore a spiritual, mental, and emotional being. . . . Believing that our mother, the beloved Earth, is inert matter is destructive to yourself" (118). Dumas's "Echo Tree" suggests that, if this is true, perhaps myth is our only way to speak to this fact.

The bittersweet, spirit-filled kinship between African Americans and the rural South begins to fade in Dumas's story "Goodbye, Sweetwater."

Dust-laden Holly Springs, Arkansas, is the setting of a story in which Layton Bridges and his Granny Lincoln are the principal characters. Extraction industries (cement factories and bauxite mines) have replaced agriculture (tobacco and cotton plantations). This change in people's relationship to the land leaves Layton and Granny Lincoln feeling as if they live "on the edge of a great burnt-out plain, thirsty and bitter, cracking daily under the malice of men" (Dumas 41). To underscore their desperation, Dumas notes the area's depopulation: "Besides Layton and his grandmother there were five other families. None of them could claim any young people, except for the kids, too young to move out on their own" (42). Indeed, Layton waits for the day when his mother, who has relocated to New York City, will send for him.

With his grandmother refusing to leave Holly Springs, Layton takes comfort in the idea that she is "indestructible," a character trait that comes in part from her religious belief. Alarmed by "big trucks loaded with ores stopped in front of [her] house," Granny Lincoln turns to the Bible for comfort. Dumas writes, "Finally she had taken consolation in the Bible, saying that all of those trucks and men were signs. . . . It was written that in the latter days, Satan and his angels would come forth from the earth seeking whom they might devour" (44). Layton admires his grandmother but does not share her religious interpretation of environmental change. Dumas explains, "The Bible didn't hold that much interest for him. . . . He didn't want to distrust the Bible, but then he could not give it all of his trust" (54). Biblical myth is not enough for Layton; he desires more. A story of environmental uncertainty and upheaval, "Goodbye, Sweetwater" leaves readers with a vision of a young African American man positioned to "cast off the dreams and things people said" (56). On the verge of geographic relocation, Layton does not yet have the myths to imagine his life in the North. Desire for action supersedes Layton's need for motivating stories. ("He would believe no one, and if he dreamed something, he would not believe it were true until *he* made it come true" [56].) Confronted with an uncertain and unplaced future, Layton is not assured by words and stories. He determines action is his only recourse.

Of the adolescent protagonists "on the brink of manhood" in Dumas's work, Eugenia Collier comments, "There is no loss of innocence, for innocence is the luxury of the protected. This youngster is already aware that his motherland [the U.S.] would destroy him if it could; buffered by his community he has developed the toughness of spirit which enables him

to endure" (Redmond 192). Dumas's adolescents wrestle with becoming and belief through the presence and absence of mythic language. They symbolize the human longing to speak to and with the nonhuman natural world. Whether this communion between humans and other natural elements succeeds or fails can be determined by whether or not a character will allow myth's potential to take root. Dumas suggests these young men-in-the-making need the constructive aspects of myth to thrive in the world.

In contrast to European American ecoliterary history's trek from New England to the American West, Dumas's stories examined here settle in the U.S. South before drawing characters northward in the Great Migration. This mobile mythic voice helps expand the presence of African American perspectives and the U.S. South in quests for a fuller awareness of American ecoliterature. His mythmaking and unmaking demonstrate that even nonindigenous people have a need for myth that puts them in communication with the nonhuman natural world. Herman Cromwell Gilbert writes, "Dumas clearly belongs to that genre of African American writers in whose works myth and reality engage in a shifting, ritualistic dance along the ghostly corridor separating Africa and the Americas. But he has the perspicacity not to shun the material while embracing the spiritual, for he understands that they are equal parts of the same world" (Redmond 239–40). Dumas's constructive myths equalize by addressing a people's spiritual need for connection to their geographic materiality. His mythic impulse attends to the needs of a nonindigenous people whose fragile relationship with the land reflects their demeaned human status.

The work of Percival Everett also inhabits the worlds of myth and reality, yet he does so with a geography and impact quite different from Dumas's. In shifting to Everett's work, it is possible to contemplate the place of race and myth in the American West. Additionally, a shift must be made away from the constructive impact of Dumas's mythic voice to Everett's body of work, which explores the impact of destructive myths about race. For this reason, Everett's mythic voice illuminates ecological burden, particularly in biting satire that castigates oppressive human systems. However, his personal life reflects ecological beauty as well. Born and raised in South Carolina, Everett now resides with his wife and child on a ranch in California. A gardener, Everett also maintains "a menagerie that includes a goat, two dogs, and a cat . . . , as well as two mules, a horse, and five donkeys" (Monaghan 18). Unlike many of his negatively racial-

ized characters, Everett appears to have secured an intimate and varied relationship with nonhuman nature.

Although the region was sought out as an escape from racism faced in other American regions, the American West has not always been an easy place for African Americans to obtain a vibrant life with human or nonhuman nature. At the same time, Mart A. Stewart calls the American West the "Ur-region" where so much of U.S. environmentalism and environmental history was grounded ("If John Muir . . ." 139). Perhaps its defining role in this history and the relatively smaller numbers of African Americans in the region compared to the U.S. South is partially to blame for the neglect of black ecological agency in American discourse. The black presence in the West has received some attention from scholars,[5] yet decades of hypermasculine, "whitewashed" images of the American West in print and electronic media have left behind an almost iron-clad set of myths that still marginalize its nonwhite history and that still impact nonwhites who live in the region.

This section examines how Everett depicts the ecological burdens of the American West in three of his works. *God's Country* (1994) is set in the postbellum West and explores the search for the American Indian–impersonating hoodlums who have destroyed the homestead of Curt Marder. Bubba, a formerly enslaved tracker, assists Curt in searching for the hoodlums. *Watershed* (1996) follows the life of African American hydrologist Robert Hawks in the post-1960s West as a fight over water rights brings him face to face with his grandfather's multidimensional legacy. *Grand Canyon, Inc.* (2001), set after the Vietnam War, pairs Rhino Tanner (a European American gun-toting, big-game hunter with entrepreneurial designs on a national park) with the narrating sidekick, BB Trane. In all of these works, myths about race manifest themselves in the human experience of the West.

Racist myth enhances the experience of those racialized positively and impedes those racialized negatively. Regina Austin explores the ramification of this in the commercial realm in her essay, "'A Nation of Thieves': Consumption, Commerce, and the Black Public Sphere." This essay explains her concept of "economic deviance."

> In so very many areas of public life, blacks are condemned and negatively stereotyped for engaging in activities that white people undertake without a second thought. Among the most significant of these is buying and selling

> goods and services. Despite the passage of state and federal antidiscrimination and public accommodations laws, blacks are still fighting for the right to shop and the right, if not the reason, to sell. Because blacks have not yet secured these rights, many of those who have the temerity to shop or to sell are treated like economic miscreants . . . Shopping and selling by blacks, or more broadly consumption and commerce, are in essence considered deviant activities by many whites and by many blacks as well. It may be hard for some readers to accept the categorization of such mundane activities as deviance, but deviance is gauged, not by the intrinsic nature of an act, but by powerful people's response to it. Deviance is a social construct and a mechanism of social control. (229)

Understood as miscreants and deviants from the racial norm, innocent African Americans face criminalization in the commercial arena. Negative racialization haunts their attempts to participate in routine activity in a consumerist society. Austin makes a compelling argument about the pervasiveness of this problem in day-to-day business; however, these racializations dominate the noncommercial arena as well.

My analysis of the role of myth in three of Everett's works extrapolates Austin's concept of "economic deviance"[6] to the realm of ecology. I contend that what I term "ecological entitlement" is afforded to those racialized positively, and "ecological deviance" is assigned to those racialized negatively. Activities associated with human ecological agency such as being recognized and protected as a full member of humanity, developing and maintaining relationships with nonhuman nature, and establishing legally supported relationships to land are thwarted by the presumption of ecological deviance. Set in an American region mythologized as white, Everett's works analyzed here demonstrate the ways in which race dictates American ecological experience.

Conscious of the West's saturation in myths and symbols,[7] Everett satirizes the region, taking advantage of the host of images that have been compiled in literature and film, showing how racial myth can dominate ecological experience. However, Everett does not see himself as writing westerns. Commenting about his novella *God's Country* he says, "I was looking to exploit the fact that there is a mythic West. . . . And how that mythology that was invented for the West is really the American story. Not the story itself but the fact that it was needed" (Birnbaum 2).[8] Need for invented mythology is at the heart of this ecocritical reading of Everett's novels. This mythology justifies the ecological disparities in the experi-

ence of "Americaness," and by extension, humanness. Indeed, in Everett's work, ecological disparity can be read as the ethos of America. It is as Curt Marder sums up: "Gettin' to the land before everybody else. That's what this country's all about" (*God's Country* 23). The myths that support ecological entitlement and ecological deviance, two sides of Everett's interpretation of the American story, are the targets of his wry, often humorous, fiction. This American mythology hinges on giving ecological entitlement to those deemed worthy of it and policing those deemed unworthy. Ultimately, Everett's texts suggest the perils of unwarranted ecological entitlement and presumed ecological deviance that result when burdensome myths go unchallenged, leaving Americans, an American region, and America itself languishing in symbolic atrophy.

Everett's use of metafiction is a central strategy in undoing the power of negative myth. The construction of his fiction brings attention to the formation of myths that become the truth. As Patricia Waugh notes, "The metafictional novel . . . situates its resistance *within* the form of the novel itself. . . . Metafiction . . . converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism" (6–7). The metafictional elements of Everett's work support the pervasiveness of ecological disparity. In *Watershed*, the metafictional structure of Everett's novel criticizes a myopic perspective on the novel's action; text from real and fictional discourses such as hydrologic data, U.S. government treaties, prospector diaries, and fly-tying specifications are interspersed with the contemporary story of Robert Hawks and anecdotes from his grandfather's life. Compiling the story in this manner, Everett highlights the role of words in determining and recording people's relationship to land and the world around them. Through the form of his work, readers must take into account the multidisciplinary influences on ecological experience (i.e., governmental, social, scientific). As lived experience, these semantic worlds and ecological outlooks come together in a manner that stresses that no individual discourse exists independent of the others. Both species and discourses are interrelated.

Metafiction in *God's Country* has a comedic edge. Curt reflects on the story itself, saying, "This western setup I felt was in the long run destined to be self-defeating. Me and Bubba and this boy tearing across the territory in search of my woman, facing death at the hands of Injun impersonators. But I was bound to do it. That was the code, our code, the code of the frontier" (*God's Country* 27). While Curt is bound to seeking

revenge as part of frontier code, the story's setup involves an ironic cast of characters, including the West's marker of ecological entitlement (i.e., Curt), an African American man, and a white boy who is really a girl. Everett spoofs ideology related to this code through a humorous depiction of Colonel George A. Custer as both a western military icon and a secret cross-dresser. Custer tells Curt,

> The heathen has no respect for the ownership of land. I mean, we take it and they want it back, keep coming back. . . . I know why. . . . To confuse *us*. To make us question ourselves, our values. We *must* have more land than we need. It's essential to our maintaining a balance between greed and hypocrisy, between unhealthy subsistence and needless, uncontrolled growth. "Be assured, my young friend, that there is a great deal of *ruin* in a nation." It's the American way. I'm talking about our way of life, man. . . . First the slaves wanting to be free and now these red heathens. It's enough to make you spit in bath water. (127–28)

As a metafictional twist, Everett undercuts the wisdom of the frontier code by exposing the faulty nature of the ideology behind it. Disparaging descriptions Custer utters, such as "greed and hypocrisy" and "unhealthy subsistence and needless, uncontrolled growth," do not suggest this is a code worth upholding. It appears Custer identifies with Curt as a member of a privileged in-group; they are both men, presumed to be racially white, and allegiant to the code of racial and ecological entitlement. Dana Nelson, in his book *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men*, writes, "Adapting 'white manhood' as the marker for civic unity worked as an apparently democratizing extension of civic entitlement. . . . 'White manhood' was a useful category for inventing national unity because it abstracted men's interests out of local issues and identities in an appeal to a nationally shared 'nature'" (6–7). But Custer, in fact, cheats Curt, giving him a false "United States Government voucher" (signed by Lieutenant N. O. Knoys) for his help in locating Big Elk. Yet even when Curt gets into legal trouble trying to cash his fake voucher, his racial privilege saves him. Although his code is founded on shaky ideology, Curt benefits ultimately from its existence. This imagined fraternity yields concrete results.

Grand Canyon, Inc. identifies the role of myth, words, and images in the formation of the main character's ecological entitlement. Everett begins the novella by mocking the personal mythology of Rhino Tanner. He

embodies the myth of the Great White Conqueror[9] whose violence and ecological domination are thought to be not only necessary but also beneficial to those who are conquered. Commenting on all of the stories Rhino tells about himself, the narrator remarks, "Of all the things he claimed, only the part about being a good rifle shot was true at all, though he never fired a single shot in Vietnam or in any other war" (*Grand Canyon, Inc.* 3). Rhino's father, a supposed World War II hero, has modeled this personal mythmaking. Cousin Lars informs Rhino that "the only thing [Rhino's] daddy saved was the toast from burning" (45). Rhino is so enamored with the power of image that news of his wife's death sparks glee that he has added another facet to his "story." Everett writes, "Tanner liked the sound of it. It sounded tragic. He liked that he was *something*, even if it was a *widower*" (29). Rhino voraciously associates himself with and consumes stories that confirm his image as the Great White Conqueror who subdues nature for the racially privileged. His biracial son, Niko, articulates the dangers of this myth. At the height of the war with his father over the commercialization of the Grand Canyon, Niko expresses, "He is a product of his own mind and that mind is reels and reels of old movies and issues of *Boys' Life*. He will be the death of this planet and he is beginning by excising a vital organ. He is a cancer in the heart of Earth" (107). Niko has confronted the myth, or the historical fiction, of the Great White Conqueror and come to somber conclusions about this myth's ecological endpoint. Resolute in an effort to save the planet, Niko attempts to kill his father.

The myth of the Great White Conqueror depends on derogatory notions about the conquered–in Everett's work, generally Native Americans and African Americans. In other words, the vanquisher is justified because the vanquished are inferior with religious and biological markers of their deviance asserted. For instance, Indians and blacks are repeatedly referred to as "heathens" in *God's Country*. The idea that these groups are somehow "closer to nature" (i.e., biologically less human) is uttered in Marder's recommendation about how someone who is white (i.e., Jen/Jake Stenson) can become a tracker. He explains, "Learn it while you're a pup or be born to it, which means being a nigger or an Injun or some other breed what's got a good nose and natural animal senses" (*God's Country* 50–51). The sense that Bubba is somehow less than human catalyzes Marder's attempts to kill him at the end of the novel. Curt explains, "I was staring at him and I don't know what come over me, but it was like some kind of blind historical urge and that black man in front of me

weren't no kind of real human being, just a thing. I raised my gun and put a bullet in his back" (*God's Country* 218). It is through characters' actions such as this that *God's Country* "paints on the familiar canvas of the West a new picture of the vast, deep problem of racial prejudice" (Krauth 321). In this story, though, Everett gives the victim of racialized violence the last word. Bubba defiantly says to Marder, "You cain't kill me" and escapes on horseback (*God's Country* 219), saving himself from the racist logic that he is better off dead.

A legacy of slavery, scientific racism, and stereotypical notions about marginalized groups extend to the more contemporary setting of *Watershed* as well. Native Americans and African Americans in the novel are always "suspect" in their attempts to have relationships to American law and land similar to those considered fully human and fully American.[10] As John Hat explains to Robert, "If you're an Indian, you don't believe in civil rights. It simply doesn't make sense. They come and talk about equality again and again, but they always lie. . . . We're not American citizens. We're Indians. We're African Americans" (*Watershed* 138). Likewise, "American Indian Revolution" fighter Big Junior proclaims, "I'm at war with the government" and tells Robert, "You are too" (48). Even a white resident assumes a kind of political kinship between the two groups when he accuses Robert of being "on their side" when Robert recommends payment for the use of tribal water. Not surprisingly, we also learn that the two FBI agents who are killed (because of efforts to expose a government ecological scandal) come from marginalized human groups. As if to stress the historical basis for solidarity to be found between African Americans and Native Americans in the novel, the Indian FBI agent is identified as a Seminole, a group well-known for providing safe harbor for runaway slaves and high rates of intermarriage with African Americans. This reference also hearkens to the expulsion of Seminoles and African Americans from the United States that is detailed in Albery Whitman's poetry. The novel leaves the killing of these two men unresolved, as if to support Dicky's observation that "You can't murder Indians. . . . Murder is a legal concept. You can kill an Indian but you can't murder one. You have to have a law against it before it's murder" (187). Although Dicky is a member of a group indigenous to what is now called the United States of America, he is not afforded the same protections under the law as those who enjoy racial and, therefore, ecological entitlement and are understood to be full citizens. Thus, his very life is endangered by the written and unwritten laws of a government

whose distinctions between ecological entitlement and deviance are inextricably tied to racist notions of human biodiversity. As William Handley notes, "*Watershed* is about how the invisible is made visible–how we can *see* the consequences of belief in things that may not be real or objectively true but that have historical consequences and legacies, such as racist or Christian beliefs, two ideological ghosts that drove the machine of American expansion and conquest" (310).

The most graphic tool Everett uses to suggest the idea that racist mythology dictates the ecological experiences of Native Americans and African Americans is repeated acts of violence, frequently from officers of the state. This plot device gives credence to Stephen Butterfield's contention that "in political satire, laughter is always with a tight mouth, and humor shifts quickly to furious anger" (252). Hence, Everett's satirical writing relies heavily on humor but not at the expense of truth: characters from marginalized human populations suffer immensely for their ecological deviance. Lynchings, shootings, brutal harassment, and threats of violence abound in the texts. The killing of Tad Johnson, a fictional Black Panther Party member in *Watershed*, is a haunting example of this violence at work. Everett writes, "The cop, one of eight, shot Brendell Lewis, who was then struck by a bullet from the pistol of another officer. Another cop stepped in with his .45 caliber Thompson submachine gun and fired through the walls into the bedroom; one bullet struck a sleeping Johnson in the thigh. Into the bedroom the raiders marched and each servant of the people fired one round into Johnson's head" (129).[11] The designation "servants of the people" for the mercenary police officers underscores the racist logic that has dehumanized these African American characters. Robert learns of this story, which is told and retold, when he's about fourteen years old and is constantly policing himself to avoid a similar fate. The unrelenting surveillance by these "servants of the people" reminds Robert of his second-class citizenship and prohibits his full enjoyment of the natural world, unlike his white counterparts who are racialized positively and whose bodies are not policed in this fashion.

Everett makes this point in every story: racial myths result in violent situations in which the marginalized must defend their lives. In *God's Country*, Curt shoots Bubba, and the innocent man from Mississippi is hanged. In *Watershed*, Robert, his family members, Black Panthers, and Native Americans are subjected to unwarranted criminalization and life-threatening violence. In *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, an African American man

who is in the federal witness protection program (because he "witnessed a KKK ritual killing" [106]) is the first casualty of the war (107) between the Conservation-Minded Members of the Federal Witness Protection Program and Tannerland Resort. There are huge consequences to defending marginalized humanity: everything from losing one's livelihood (as did Robert's grandfather) to losing one's life. Hence, Everett depicts those who cannot afford to be silent about their own racialization when discussing ecological concerns. The social construction of their humanity has given them a violence-soaked history of their vulnerability.

Everett's works implicate the society that upholds racially determined ecological deviance not only in the treatment of racially marginalized characters but also through his characterizations of the ecologically privileged. In sum, Everett's characterizations support the idea that those with the most environmental entitlement are the least deserving of it. At the same time, his characters are seldom neither entirely good nor bad. For instance, of the characters in *Watershed*, Native American author Sherman Alexie writes, "They are ugly, horrible, magical, and beautiful human beings. These people confused and frightened me. They angered and frustrated me. . . . I constantly wished the characters in this book would finally, once and for all, make the right decisions and be good and pure and decent" (Everett, *Watershed*, xi). Regardless of the complexity of his characters, Everett uses their characterization as a way to highlight the faulty myths that support ecological entitlement.

White male characters such as Rhino and the government that has sanctioned his ecological entitlement enjoy unencumbered access to the West, yet they are inept stewards of the land. Rhino merely sees land as a commodity from which he can make a profit; he is willing to develop a national park for his own economic gain. In *Watershed*, the U.S. government creates biologically dangerous materials and believes foolishly it can contain the poisonous by-products inside a Native American community. Racial mythology supports the extreme consequences of entitlement and deviance: whites with sketchy morals (or ecological sense) have far more influence over the land than they should; innocent minorities are thrust into a world that criminalizes them simply for their appearance, leaving them without connection to American law or land. The government's ideological shortsightedness even spills out beyond marginalized communities. Everett writes in *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, "While Tanner was killing off the large animals of Earth and counting his money, the United States Depart-

ment of Interior was cutting back and cutting back and cutting back spending on the National Parks. They said they couldn't help it. No standing in the way of tax cuts. Bombs were more expensive than ever. More and more people were visiting the parks and so it took more and more money to maintain the sites and the only answer they could find was to spend less and less" (23–24). Everett draws a parallel between the individual acts of the eco-entitled Tanner with the American government that mirrors his lack of ecological sensitivity. Both can be interpreted as dangers to the environment: the word choice of "killing" rather than "hunting" gives no justification of Tanner's activities, and the government's ideological preference for tax cuts and bombs over maintained national parks appears absurd, particularly when the parks experience increased public interest. Combined, Everett's depictions of Tanner and the government depict two forces encroaching on both nonhuman and human nature. The passage goes on to describe Grand Canyon National Park in extreme disrepair. The novella suggests that faults in American government will result in negative ecological consequences for more than just racial minorities. The government is irresponsibly stewarding the land, and it gives the most support for attachment to the land to those, such as Tanner, who make a mockery of ecological belonging. Everett's writing is in keeping with satire's "general purpose of exposing, and if possible correcting human follies"; as "black satire" it "adds to this purpose . . . a clear vision of the human follies peculiar to North American history" (S. Butterfield 255).

Yet Everett's texts also suggest that negatively racialized minorities also hold myths that are dangerous. For Robert Hawks, it is the myth of depoliticized, scientific objectivity. A confessed misanthrope and hydrologist for the fictional "Naturalists' Conservancy," Robert Hawks is committed initially to the science of his job. He explains, "I considered how I had done so much to remove all things political from my life. Even in my work as a hydrologist I seldom involved myself in the use of my findings for any kind of agenda promotion; rather I saw myself as an objective, hired gun" (*Watershed* 152). When questioned by a resident about who owns the water on Plata Mountain, Robert matter-of-factly responds, "I just study water. I don't know whose it is" (30). Later he proclaims that "I [describe] the geological features of the Plata Mountain drainage . . . for an environmental organization. I don't get involved in political stuff. I'm just a scientist" (56). Everett's *Watershed*, however, makes a depoliticized, science-centered approach to hydrology an impossibility for Robert by the novel's end.

The novel concludes with Robert determined to report to his employer a roll of film exposing government ecological exploitation. Robert's grandfather, who came to the medical aid of a Black Panther and supports Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s activism, models Robert's decision: there can be no apolitical professionalism; if you are an upstanding human you will respond to the needs of those in trouble; this is part of your humanity and your professional duty. In this code, work cannot be separated from one's moral or ecological obligations. Louise, a Native American who invites Robert to the reservation to "meet [her] people [who] are part of [the] land" he studies (19), is also crucial to this shift. She remarks, "Our way tells us that when the river dies, so will our people" (19). Robert begins to see that some people cannot conceive of separating the concerns about the river from the concerns of the people. Through these examples and a story line that sharpens the connections between them, Robert is unable to maintain a separation between science and politics. He learns what Mary O'Brien details: "Once you are a scientist . . . you take a political side. There are infinite questions that you could ask about the universe, but as only one scientist, you must necessarily choose to ask only certain questions. Asking certain questions means not asking other questions, and this decision has implications for society, for the environment, and for the future. The decision to ask any question, therefore, is necessarily a value-laden, social, political decision as well as a scientific decision" (706). In Robert's conversion into a scientist willing to acknowledge the political dimensions of his work and who takes another step and acts on his knowledge for the benefit of humankind, *Watershed* presents a vision of U.S. ecological outlook that does not separate human interests from those of the other elements of nature. Also, the conversion suggests that those who are racially marginalized ought to have the same opportunity to act as a part of the natural world as those for whom nonhuman nature has been historically reserved.

In "Undoing and Redoing the Western," Leland Krauth writes, "On the face of it Everett's turn to Western fiction is odd, given that he grew up in the south; it seems a perfect example of the postmodern writer's inclination to make fiction out of fiction" (314). Everett's artistic license to write about any region, real or imagined, and his adult life spent in the West aside, instead of odd I posit Everett's turn to Western fiction as *necessary*. Should writing still hold influence in U.S. culture, then Everett's work can help us recognize the destructive ecological consequence of racial

myths. One myth that Everett dismantles is the idea that the West stands apart, distinguished by regional exceptionalism. His works show us that the West's story is the American story, and that regions mythologized as racially neutral or white are interrelated with those that are perceived as black or racially marginalized. The lynching of the Mississippi man in *God's Country* demonstrates that racialized violence influences the geographic movement of Americans who can theoretically travel throughout the United States. The vignettes from the South and West spliced together in *Watershed* explain that no one American, or world, region stands free and clear of another. In Africa, Rhino builds the clout he needs for his life in the West and gains financial stability from the Sultan of Brunei. The multicultural collection of people who make their home in the West because of the Federal Witness Protection Program in *Grand Canyon, Inc.* become more vigilant defenders of ecological concerns than the white longtime residents. All of these works bring into focus the interrelatedness of American regions, the dangerous results of racial mythology, and the unattainable goal of separating ecological concerns from societal reactions to human biodiversity. Everett's texts suggest that "undoing and redoing" the mythologized West may be a crucial step in making both ecological and social gains.

Conclusion: Myth's Role in Ecological Vision

Through myth, we grope for connection to place. Mythologies are there at the beginning of human-land relationships, and they can also block human-land relationships from evolving. Murray Bookchin wants to infuse science and technology with myth in his comments, "Poetry and imagination must be integrated with science and technology, for we have evolved beyond an innocence that can be nourished exclusively by myth and dreams" (Bookchin 84). I do not suggest that myth be the exclusive or an exclusionary genre of ecoliterature; however, in examining the constructive and destructive functions of myth in Dumas's and Everett's work, we can better understand the strengths of including myth as part of our ecological understanding.

Caught between the human need for myths in a time of geographic hypermobility and the lasting impact of oppressive racial myths, contemporary African Americans stand to benefit from the "perpetual need for myth's approximations to evolve" (Eslinger 1). Henry Dumas's writing

represents the beauty of being natural: human beings can make myths that connect them to nonhuman nature. His work suggests that the project of creating myths should not be over, for this activity provides ecological beauty. In demonstrating ecological burden, Everett's work shows how human groups are endangered by racist myths that dramatically impact their experience of place and inhibit their ability to develop affinity for the nonhuman natural world. His work underscores that we must be cognizant of the myths about humanity that we tell ourselves. Everett's myth deconstruction leaves us at the same place where Dumas begins: with the need for new stories.

The negatively racialized cannot afford to ignore the role of myths in their ecological experience. Ecological discourse that does not recognize the immense impact of racist mythology will always be underinformed, offensive, and counterproductive. Returning to my application of Austin's concept of economic deviance, I cite her reflection on the consequences of the criminalization of people of African descent in the commercial world. She writes:

> The harm that blacks suffer from disrespectful and disparate treatment goes beyond psychological pain or the sting of injustice in a legal regime supposedly dedicated to racial equality. The most disturbing aspect of the discriminatory service blacks experience in common ordinary commercial transactions is economic exploitation. . . . Moreover, discriminatory service narrows blacks' choices regarding where to consume and impedes their ability to enter into efficient commercial transactions. . . . In addition . . . many of the maneuvers blacks employ to make consumption easier entail costs that add to the price of purchases. Finally, whites also are exploited by the disparate treatment blacks receive, although they hardly seem to notice. (Austin 231–32)

What are the consequences of ecological entitlement and deviance? Everett's works suggests that ecodeviants are constantly cheated out of ecological belonging. Racist mythology follows African Americans wherever they go, and with it the potential for life-extinguishing violence. In addition, the eco-entitled are blinded to the true costs of their position in the world. This ideology presupposes that the eco-entitled should be able to continue their practices under the false pretense that they will never suffer like those deemed ecodeviants.

Dumas's stories discussed here are positioned at the beginning of adolescents' understanding about the natural world. The adolescent stage of

human development is, perhaps, a fitting metaphor for the world's relationship to previous and future ecological behavior: people around the world are in conversation with their peer group about the model of behavior set forth by their predecessors. At the beginning of what Al Gore calls our "age of consequences," what Alice Walker calls our age of "global enlightenment," we would be wise to enact the insight from both Henry Dumas and Percival Everett: unearth misguided mythology, and create a mythology for a sustainable future.

FIVE

"I Got the Blues"
Epistemology

Thinking a Way out of Eco-Crisis

Thin grass and sparse growths of pine cover the low, rolling hills. The roads are cut into the red, sandy clay, and they stream with water in the spring rains. . . . In the fields the older people still sing the work songs of the slaves who toiled in the sun a hundred years ago; and across the fields at night, the yellow light from an oil lamp brightening a rain-streaked window, there is sometimes the lonely sound of the blues.

Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (1959, 1975)

[Blues] is an affectively important way of apprehending a musical process *and* the human world; a way of steering through musical composition *and* through worldly affairs. . . . While *being* blue or "having the blues" is easily if inadequately equated with being sad or down, *doing* blues must involve far more.

Steven G. Smith, "Blues and Our Mind-Body Problem" (1992)

Mr. & Mrs. Crab are not into
destroying the world
they are crawling to the mud flats
to take in some rotten insects. . . .

The person who OK's biological weapons
should not cry about the stench of
new diseases
The one who cuts off the trees
so the orangutans can't hang
should not wonder about ecological devastation.

Jayne Cortez, "Endangered Species List Blues,
in *Jazz Fan Looks Back*" (2002)

Call: Putting the Blues into Place

The written word was and is a crucial tool for African American creativity; however, the place of musicality, aurality, and orality in this tradition also continues to have a thoroughgoing presence. Music, itself, has been with African Americans through a host of environments, and its sonic and cultural DNA represents its African and New World parentage. One of African American musical tradition's most famous offspring is the blues. In the epigraph, Samuel Charters's portrayal places the blues at the meeting grounds of people and, in this case, rural place. He first makes reference to songs for collective work in fields sung by older people as evidence of the meeting of people and place, then directs his readers to the lonely sound of the blues emerging from a dwelling, evoking both the sites and development of the blues. Clyde Woods expands our understanding of sites where the blues joined people and places. He writes, in *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, "Blues accompanied those who worked on the levees and roads, and in the forest, fields, and prisons. They surrounded them at home, in their neighborhoods and juke joints, and at picnics, churches and other uncensored spaces where African Americans explored the parameters of their daily life, spirituality, and vision" (108). Woods's description puts the blues at the nexus of changing environments, artistic and philosophical need, and everyday living. Indeed, within the blues are people's imaginative responses to the world around them and the social circumstances that influence their navigation within their worlds. Houston Baker Jr. suggests that the blues "constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America–always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (5). I contend this blues amalgam contains insight from the accumulated ecological artistry and agency of African Americans. There is ecological testimony embedded in the blues. Blues artists have given audiences a record of artistic responses to natural facts. This art form tells the story of people from one environment trying to situate themselves in another, radically different environment.

Elements of the blues sound and ethos are directly related to the changing relationships of African Americans and their ecological experience. Blues origin stories usually begin in the lush setting of the Mississippi Delta. Once filled with swamp and forest, ambitious planters transform it, seeking to take advantage of the Mississippi River's nurturing impact on soil health. This rich, alluvial soil was stewarded by enslaved Africans

accustomed to singing while they worked. Their specific agricultural tasks informed the sound and content of their work songs; they used tools percussively, rhythms and content shifted to accommodate various circumstances. Ted Gioia writes, "Sugar cane demanded an aggressive, slashing attack to clear the fields . . . tobacco . . . needed to be handled with greater delicacy. Cotton was somewhere in the middle, but though collecting it demanded considerable handwork, it was still picked in rows and required an organized, paced flow of work" (44–45). These various relationships with human and nonhuman nature birthed key elements in the sound that would become known as the blues: call-and-response, improvisation, backbeat emphasis, and the blue notes from an African-inspired tonal system. After enslavement, responses to the more solitary work of sharecropping are credited with the formation of the field cry or field holler, which expressed the freer-formed moans, shouts, and "arwhoolies" of African American workers. Unlike collective work songs, hollers spotlighted a singer's individual voice. Hence, the blues emerged as the collective work songs of enslaved, primarily agricultural, workers transmuted into the solitary arwhoolies of sharecroppers, laboring in what W. E. B. Du Bois called a system of slavery by default (150). Once the country blues was born, it moved with African Americans throughout the United States, growing into unique regional utterances (e.g., Texas, Piedmont) and also fostering other musical forms, such as jazz in New Orleans.

Called to northern and city centers during the Great Migration, African Americans would shape the blues again. For instance, in the rural South, "Delta bluesman Muddy Waters recalled moving from the cotton fields to the berry harvest and the sugar beet harvest, then to the pea and bean harvest. His song 'Rolling Stone' was written to describe these travels, which were often made by hopping onto passing trains" (Gioia 45). Settling in the urban North, Muddy Waters and other formerly rural and southern artists helped transform the blues into a metropolitan, electrified sound played by small bands. Urban blues grew to include new experiences, such as northern discrimination and ghettoization. Throughout this dramatic shift from rural to urban and South to North, the musical artist maintained a role that combined individual interest in personal expression and group interest in representation of collective concerns. With artists and community in collaboration, blues' creation and maturation are tied intimately to African American environmental experience since the late nineteenth century.

Ecological perspectives born of this experience reverberate in both blues songs and texts of this study's other chapters. The songs are saturated with references to the nonhuman world, revealing the import artists gave to that world as a way to better articulate significant life events. Bloodhounds, fish, rabbits, snakes, horses, bullfrogs, birds, ponies, dogs, cows, crows, and bo-weevils make their way into songs, reflecting the rural landscapes of early blues artists and the voices of the Federal Writers' Project oral history contributors. P. Carter's advice in "Weeping Willow Blues" to "go to the river, take the chair and then set down," "When you're brokenhearted and your man is out of town" (recorded by Bessie Smith; Davis 350) is evocative of the potential solace to be found in nonhuman nature suggested in Albery Whitman's and George Moses Horton's poetry. Songs such as "Jacksonville Blues," "Southern Blues," "Black Mountain Blues," "Piney Woods Money Mama," "Charleston Blues," "Aberdeen, Mississippi Blues," "Nashville Stonewall Blues," "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues," and "New Minglewood Blues" record people rendering artistically the influence of place as seen in Henry Dumas's and Percival Everett's work. Songs such as "Highway Blues," "Going to Germany," "Go Back to the Country," "Big Road Blues," "South Bound Blues," "Runaway Blues," "Traveling Blues," "The Panama Limited," "Dark Road Blues," and "Leaving Town Blues" bespeak the trope of movement in African American ecological experience captured in Quaraysh Lansana's *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems.* The imperative of work can be read in songs such as "Poor Boy Blues," "No Job Blues," "Hustlin' Blues," "Work House Blues," "Spike Driver Blues," "Working Man Blues," and "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues." The ecological vulnerability of the marginalized that will be explored in the conclusion resonates in "High Water Everywhere–1," "High Water Everywhere–2," "Rising High Water Blues," and "Backwater Blues."[1] Like literature and oral history, the blues is a key repository for understanding the character of African American ecological experience in the past.

Many wonder whether the blues will persist as a vibrant musical genre throughout the twenty-first century. Plenty of musical forms have emerged since the blues, with perhaps hip-hop being the readiest example of how African Americans and Latinos/as used creative expression to respond to the postindustrial city. While younger blues artists such as Shemekia Copeland and 21st C-B-Boyz exist, they are in an aging music culture. Programs such as Blues in the Schools do expose young people to the art

form, yet blues music does not have the institutional support to cultivate masses of young players and audience members as do other forms, such as classical European music. (Projects such as Martin Scorsese's seven-part series titled *The Blues* [2003], with advertising, retail, and educational components, are few and far between.) In a *Chicago Tribune Magazine* essay titled "Faded Blues," Howard Reich interviews artists such as David "Honeyboy" Edwards, Pinetop Perkins, and Roebuck "Pop" Staples and describes the "majestic lineage" of Mississippi Delta blues threatened by the monotonous expectations of the tourism industry, rock-blues preferences, industry demands that yield little artistic growth, disconnection from the blues' geographic beginnings, and black neighborhood fragmentation following the gains of the civil rights movement (16–19). Kalamu ya Salaam makes a more severe claim in his essay "It Didn't Jes Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music." He writes,

> The next statement is guaranteed to be controversial, but . . . hear me out. The Blues is dead! . . . Why don't Black people listen to and play Blues today? There are all kinds of theories, but there is one simple fact: [Black music] is functional. Thus, when something dies, we grieve and move on carrying the spirit of the dead within us as we create anew. The Blues is no longer functional mainly because the conditions which created and sustained the Blues have changed. But the fact that the Blues, in the classic sense of a specific genre of music, is dead does not mean that we are not blue or that we don't have the blues. (367)

In fact, what is accurate is neither ya Salaam's haphazard statement that there are no black blues artists and listeners nor his provocative death declaration. It his contention that blues remains a part of African American culture despite dramatic changes in the community of blues fans that has merit. Some may claim this tendency in black culture results in neglected master musicians who perform older music forms to dwindling audiences; on the other hand, this pattern might also be understood as a healthy emphasis on artistic assemblage which demands that each generation create something new out of their predecessors' brilliance. Perhaps both ways of looking at this tendency are true.

To be sure, within African American culture, the blues persists and has outlasted change, offering a mammoth artistic, cultural, and philosophical legacy. Through what he identifies as "generational transformation," ya Salaam indicates that even though it may appear African Americans are

leaving the blues as a music culture behind, a blues epistemology, spirit, and perspective endures as part of the larger body of African American art and culture. International recognition and multicultural support of blues music bolsters Giles Oakley's claims that "the blues has become part of everyone's heritage, one of the great reminders that everybody, even poor, ill-educated people, has a capacity for great creativity" (258). This great creativity on the part of poor and working-class African Americans has globalized not only a particular sonic tradition but also a way of thinking that continues to shape the activities and ambitions of artists in musical and nonmusical genres.

If only consumed as part of the tourism industry, the blues' epistemological value may seem distant. Concerned that popular conceptions of the blues were reduced to the subject of romantic-sexual relationships, Sterling Brown cautioned rightly, "Stoicism is here as well as self-pity . . . rich humor as well as melancholy. There are so many Blues that any preconception might be proved about Negro folk life, as well as its opposite" (S. Brown 541). However, the multiplicity of subject matter and tone nevertheless rest on an epistemological foundation that makes the blues identifiable. The core of this epistemology is humanistic, in that it confirms the power of the human self. Humans are the "grounds for knowledge" ("epistemology," *OED*) in blues epistemology, and for this reason the blues has been described as "a reaching out towards a mature self-reliance" (Gruver 230). This maturity can only be achieved through lived experience; formal education in a school or religious tradition cannot yield the same end.

With a blues epistemology in place, any number of actions is possible. As Steven G. Smith's reference (in the epigraph) to doing blues suggests, the ideas that make the blues applicable to a variety of actions help "straddle the junction between artistic form and lived experience" and allow audiences to "get revelations of [their] condition" (S. Smith, "Blues and Our Mind-Body Problem"). Some of the actions reflective of blues epistemology include:

- Transforming painful experience through artistic production
- Gaining insight from the disadvantaged rather than the educated or elite; a bottom-to-top perspective on life
- "Expressing a black perspective on the incongruity of life . . . achieving meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions" (Cone 103)

- Affirming collective experience with the personal voice ("I" = "we"; the bardic "I")
- Critiquing the social sphere, sometimes only in a covert manner
- Alerting others to crisis
- Dwelling in reality no matter how stark; "absolute honesty in the portrayal of black life" (Davis 107); "lyrical responses to the facts of life" (Neal 108)
- Offering secular testimony; "convey[ing] the sorrow of the individual and collective tragedy that had befallen African Americans" (Woods 17)
- Relying on personal power (often referred to as "mojo") in the face of challenge; a kind of quasi-religious commitment to the self
- "Transcend[ing] through acceptance but not submission" (ya Salaam 356–57)

These activities allow people to accrue value without monetary wealth. Blues epistemology rewards through the gains of artfully rendered self and social knowledge. No matter the state of blues music culture in the future, it is important to credit the blues artists of the past and present as the authors of a distinct grounds for knowledge that permeates contemporary life and art.

An impressive history of African American poets addresses not only the epistemological but also the formal and lyrical features of the blues genre. This tradition has been anthologized in *Blues Poems* (2003), a collection edited by Kevin Young, which includes work from two of the most noted blues bards: Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. Stephen Henderson suggests that "the hallmark of Sterling Brown's poetry is its exploration of the bitter dimension of the blues . . . [and that his] treatment of the blues material ranges from emphasis on mood and character, to a focus on the sociological, to an accent on the philosophical" (32, 35); Steven Tracy remarks that "Hughes used blues structures, themes, imagery, patterns, and voices to link his literary work to the productions of 'the folk,' establishing the continuity of the African American creative mind that he felt was so necessary to foster a racial self-awareness and pride" (3). The legacy of Hughes's cultivation of self-awareness and pride and Brown's bitter sociological and philosophical reflections can all be seen in the next generation of African American artists to turn to the blues as an aesthetic resource: Black Arts Movement artists and aestheticians of the

early 1960s to early 1970s. Poets such as Sterling Plumpp, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and Wanda Coleman saw in the blues a tool for fine art as well as social engagement. Eager to use folk traditions from within African American culture, these writers turned to the blues to meet the demand for socially responsive art for, by, and about African Americans.[2] Larry Neal, one of the Black Arts Movement's most prominent thinkers and artists, wrote, in his essay "The Ethos of the Blues," "Even though the Blues are cast in highly personal terms, they stand for the collective sensibility of a people at particular stages of cultural, social, and political development" (113). At a time when the Black Arts movement stood hand in hand with the Black Power movement, blues-inspired writing signaled a stage of reclamation and celebration of African American artistic traditions and an explicit connection between the arts and social struggle.

This is a call to understand how the blues, particularly its epistemology, might meet the needs of our present stage–a stage in African American literary tradition in which artists create with a specific interest in African American culture and an awareness of changing ecological conditions around the world. Al Gore hearkens to Winston Churchill to identify our time as "the period of [ecological] consequences" (*Inconvenient Truth* 100–101). This call contains many questions: Does blues epistemology have enough elasticity to be relevant at this stage? How does the blues' focus on the human self impact its potential relevance to a time of ecological consequence? Does its epistemological orientation leave it imperceptive to nonhuman ecological plights?

Response: Blues with Surreality

The written, live performance, and recorded poetry of Jayne Cortez carries the blues into the twenty-first century in a way that affirms the breadth of blues epistemology and the nuances of ecological perspectives centered in human perception.

Emerging during the Black Arts Movement and firmly committed to African American culture as a poet, activist, institution builder, and teacher, Cortez inherits Hughes's and Brown's literary legacy (she even makes direct reference to Hughes in her poem "Taking the Blues Back Home"). Both a page and performance poet, Cortez benefits from a childhood that fostered an affinity for musical expression as well. She writes that her mother, Ada Johns, introduced her to music and that she "took

piano lessons and harmony, played bass in the orchestra in junior high, and hung out at the record shop after school" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 7). A self-described "serious Jazz fanatic," she saw live performances of a host of blues and jazz greats, such as Alberta Hunter, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, Little Esther Phillips, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Clifford Brown, and Duke Ellington. While married to her first husband, jazz saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman, she gave birth to their son, Denardo Coleman, a drummer who performs and records with Cortez's current band, the Firespitters. Whether she performs with her band or writes the poetry to be found in her books, Cortez does the blues by applying its epistemology.[3]

With a deep, personal music history and blues poet forefathers such as Hughes and Brown, Cortez distinguishes her interpretation of the blues aesthetic with her explicit attention to ecological, rather than merely environmental, concerns. The critical approach Eric Gary Anderson defines as "ecosocial" in his study of work by Toni Cade Bambara and Tayari Jones seems helpful as an approach to illuminate Cortez's aesthetic. Her poetry does "reach beyond and even bypass [the] inclination to embrace an idyllic, pristine natural world" and "acknowledge the way particular physical places are marked and even suffused by political and social convulsions and trauma" (Anderson, "Black Atlanta," 195). Yet Cortez is not limited by the local scope Anderson sees in ecosocial writing. Through stylistic hallmarks such as tonal semantics, surrealism, scatological imagery, and repetition, she draws readers' eyes and ears to trans-species corporeality and sites within Africa and its diaspora along a blues axis. The present tense of her disturbing images gives voice to those already living in ecological ruin and alerts the rest of us to ecological threat and distress. Her work foretells of a larger-scale, impending doom from ecological collapse coming from the cumulative impact of phenomena such as militarism, imperialism, consumerism, colonialism, and racism. Yet her blues-inflected eco-poetry is not without possibility. While Cortez testifies on behalf of traumatized places and beings, she creates a blues cry that yearns for change before we all face life in a postapocalyptic world.

In the poem "You Know" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 35), Cortez underscores the seriousness with which she takes her role as a blues artist. As is often the case in Cortez's work, repetition is used in an incantory fashion; in this instance, repetition of the phrase "you know" throughout the poem is followed by lines that address the poetic voice's desire to "write a blues." By contrasting the colloquial conversational filler "you know" with a deep

yearning to find a language that will accomplish her goal of capturing the "basic progressive aspects of the blues in the deepest sense" and a blues that "talks about and has respect for the struggles of the past and is definitely concerned with the present and the future" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 36), she reiterates that language has multiple applications. The materiality of the images that follow the repeated inconsequential verbal pause of "you know" serves as a dramatic testament to the power of language as a part of the physical world. The poem contrasts the vaporous, almost negligible (if not irritating) repetition of "you know" with the concrete images of the "dark meat of a crocodile," the "Joe Louis punch," "Big Mama Thornton," the breaking of a computer, and the emergence of the nations of Guinea Bissau and Namibia. She unites these images with her longing to achieve a "serious," "significant," and "unsubmissive" blues with a pleasurable feeling in her "writing hand," a hand that can fuse the aural with the tactile in her suggestion that it "can bring two pieces of life together in your ear" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 36). As Aldon Nielsen notes, Cortez has an "insistent physicality of even the most fantastic-seeming imagery. This is a constant note in Cortez's writings, and it is everywhere joined to her insistence upon the physicality of writing and the textuality of the word" (226). By merging the physicality of writing and the urgency of writing a blues she suggests that the blues is flexible enough to address the materiality of our present ecological condition.

Cortez's poetry proclaims this ecological condition is the product of and exacerbated by many phenomena. The witnessing and testimonial aspects of the blues, specifically the bardic "I," bring these phenomena to bear in "I Got the Blue-Ooze 93." Here, evocation of tonal semantics transforms the word "blues" into "blue-ooze"–a symbol of Earth's critical condition and the dire circumstances for its inhabitants. Each line of the poem opens with the phrase "I got the" and ends with varieties of "blue-ooze." For example:

> I got the fishing in raw sewage blue-ooze
> I got the toxic waste dump in my backyard blue-ooze
> I got the contaminated drinking water blue-ooze
> I got the man-made famine blue-ooze
> I got the dead house dead earth blue-ooze.
>
> (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 60)

This poem employs repetition and the collective "I" so common in blues music, yet it also speaks to the incredible reach of the blues subject; she

goes outside the well-worn topic of human sexual/romantic relationship and alerts others to numerous world crises at once. Putting themes such as toxicity and contamination in conjunction with phenomena such as "gang banging," "domestic abuse," homelessness, colonialism, ethnic conflict, and "misinformation media penetration," "blue-ooze" signifies "multifaceted oppression" (Hill-Collins 17). Ecological disadvantage or privilege is not extracted and thought about separately from the matrix of human society. In keeping with the secular testimony of the blues, the mere articulation of these various crises rather than a list of solutions to these problems is the focus of the poem. Cortez only alludes to the need for solutions in the final line of the poem: "I got to find a way out of this blue-ooze" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 60).

The poem "Deadly Radiation Blues" affirms the blues artist's role in alerting others to and testifying about crisis. Using the opening phrase "I've seen," the poetic voice contrasts the unsettling impact of numerous "natural disasters" with the new blues brought on by the human-made disasters of the nuclear age. The contrast of the natural disasters of "earthquakes, volcanoes, avalanches, typhoons, hurricanes, and forest fires" and the human-made disasters in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Bhopal, Nevada and Utah, Chernobyl, and Three Mile Island, remind us of the role humans have in the destruction of our world. Like the blues singers whom Angela Davis profiles in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Cortez helps "create the emotional conditions for protest" by "nam[ing] the problems the community wants to overcome" (Davis 113). At the same time, this poem goes beyond this role and makes a brief but urgent call to action near the end of the piece. She writes:

> Reactors breed plutonium
> blood cells pay their dues
> radiation keeps leaking & seeping
> and I've got the Chernobyl Three Mile Island Blues
>
> Nuclear power plants can't be dismantled
> no way to dispose the waste
> we've got to shut down those reactors
> or have the Chernobyl Three Mile Island Blues
> (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 106)

These stanzas underscore the power of "deadly radiation" on the materiality of the Earth and human bodies, and transform the secular testimony

of the blues "I" used at the beginning of the poem to an explicit reference to collective action at the end. By putting the ecological devastation of "deadly radiation" within the context of a blues poem, Cortez makes this genre an "emblem of revolutionary praxis" (Bentson 117). Large-scale nuclear disaster is a suitable context for a musical genre that highlights the perspective of the world's downtrodden. Cortez fashions this blues perspective of those bearing the largest body burden of detrimental ecological practices into an alarm about nuclear energy. She uses the blues "I" to speak for the collective, indeed global, "we" subjected to these consequences. Influenced by the repetition and refrain heard frequently in a blues song, witnessing and testifying advocate for both ameliorated personal and communal ecological experience.

"Endangered Species List Blues" juxtaposes the ecological perspectives of nonhuman animals (e.g., snow leopards, crabs, and orangutans) with humans disconnected from other species and concerned only with militarism, as can be read in the epigraph of this chapter. Although she personifies animals with her reference to "Mr. and Mrs. Crab," Cortez maintains the integrity of the animals' perspectives, stressing that they do not know of human lists of species in need of help. In addition, she describes them as morally inculpable in the destruction of the world, placing the blame on a fully guilty human "you" involved in militarism and habitat destruction. Taking on the vantage point of nonhumans, Cortez works to reorient listeners'/readers' perception of ecological issues. In her repetition of "It's not what's going up that's going down / It's what's down that's going up," she encourages her audience to consider how the conditions of the nonhuman animals in the poem reveal the detrimental priorities of some humans. Shelly Wong's reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* is useful in understanding how important this ecological reorientation can be. Wong explains, "Human and animal worlds are unmistakably linked through a shared materiality. . . . The hierarchical boundaries between the human and the animal are no longer absolute and human pretensions to the contrary are exposed as self-delusions. . . . [She] dethrones the isolate unity and, instead, articulates the connectedness of people, animals, objects, and words–in short, all the manifestations of material being" (479). As with Wong's assessment of Morrison's *Sula*, "Endangered Species List Blues" can also be said to "articulate the connectedness of . . . all manifestations of material being." This poem/song urges readers/listeners to consider the human role in ecological destruction by inverting hierarchies that place humans above other animals. By highlighting the perspective

of those beings at the bottom of human concern, Cortez invites readers to adopt an aspect of blues epistemology. In doing so, she calls for greater care for all "bodies" impacted by human ecological action. "The traditional perception of animal otherness is challenged and explored" (Love 33) in Cortez's poetry. The result, in "Endangered Species List Blues" and elsewhere, is poetry that "initiate[s] and inspire[s] the *beginning* of an imaginative consideration and reformulation of who these animals are and how we share the world" (Malamud 34). To begin reformulating a relationship with nonhuman animals, humans must shift their grounds for knowledge from those on the top of hierarchies to those on the bottom, animals with whom we differ dramatically but with whom we share materiality.

Surrealist nonhuman animal and reproductive references encourage Cortez's audience to further consider shared materiality in poems such as "Tell Me." It reflects Cortez's self-described approach: "I use dreams, the subconscious, and the real objects, and I open up the body and use organs, and I sink them into words, and I ritualize them and fuse them into events" (Melhem 205). Cortez amplifies her role as an artist who is able to provide vehicles for collective performances and private readings–events that create stages for conceptual change. "Tell Me" contrasts a set of ecological phenomena with the event of war to consider how war can be avoided. The poetic voice is in a state of "delirious[ness]" over the idea that a nameless "you" might not understand that phenomena such as "the arrival of rain," "the moon merging into the shadow of the earth," "the conjunction of rivers," "blood circulating in . . . legs," and "night moving into day" are "better than war" (*Poetic Magnetic* 40). Irony drives the combinations of stark, surrealist imagery that emphasize bodily fragility in the face of militarization and nuclear proliferation. References to "dead ants," "vomiting mosquitos [*sic*]," and "a hundred trillion infuriated rhinos" are fused with an "erupting" "penis bone," a vaginal "bursting silo of blues flames," a "prostate gland" filled with a "tonnage of nuclear sweat," and a "navel" "of contaminated pus" (40–41). This violent, grotesque imagery is employed to investigate whether the reader has the intellectual wherewithal to break with a status quo that supports "corrupt gluttonous controllers of profit" (42). The conclusion of the poem underscores knowledge as the precursor of lifesaving action by suggesting that even the inanimate object of "the computer" "knows" there is "no immunity" from surrealities such as "the fireball smoker of abdominal organs," "fetishes wrapped in uranium crates," and the "downwind flames of invisible

radiation" (42). However, the poetic voice needs reassurance that it is not "dreaming," "hallucinating," or "fantasizing" and that human beings will act in accord with their knowledge and do what needs to be done to safeguard both animal life and the natural occurrences made reference to in the poem.

The powerful implications of perception are the focus of "Stockpiling" as well. Here, botanical references take center stage in the first stanza:

> The stockpiling of frozen trees
> in the deep freeze of the earth
> The stockpiling of dead animals
> in the exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets
> The stockpiling of desiccated plants
> on the death root of an abcessed [*sic*] tooth
> The stockpiling of defoliants
> in the pine forest of the skull
> The stockpiling of aerosols
> in the pink smoke of a human corpse
> Stockpiles
> Of agent orange agent blue agent white acids
> Burning like the hot hoof of a race horse on
> the tongue
>
> (*Poetic Magnetic* 79)

The tools of repetition and listing converge on a recurring topic in Cortez's work: the ecological consequences of militarization, as she encourages the audience to "look at it" or understand the activity of stockpiling through numerous surreal lenses including "the anti-body in the body" (79). The sensory invitation turns to "listen[ing]" later in the poem in an effort to spark "revolutionary change now" "before . . . apathy rises up and spits fire into the toxic tears of this stockpile" (81). Cortez often envelopes her poems ironically with stark images as in "this stockpile" to punctuate the urgency of acting on the truth of our ecological circumstances. This technique bookends the poem with the central image (i.e., military stockpiling), which cannot be overlooked if ecological recovery is to occur.

Surrealism has garnered significant attention in scholarship about Cortez. As part of a larger tradition of "Afro-diasporic" surrealism that Robin D. G. Kelley analyzes in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, poems such as "Tell Me" and "Stockpiling" suggest that "any serious

motion toward freedom must begin in the mind" and that art can be "an intervention into life . . . a protracted battle against all forms of oppression" (5).[4] Her surrealist vocabulary is unexpected but not random; it relies on repeated references to natural functions, bodies, and body parts. Relying on human and nonhuman bodies in this vocabulary, Cortez encourages audiences to see their own physicality as linked to the rest of nature wherever it is; this vocabulary stretches beyond blues tropes rooted in either urban or rural locales to articulate a global consciousness. If well-received, this strategy has great promise because it disrupts the negative aspects of purely local thinking: those that obscure the global ramifications of our local choices. Lawrence Buell writes,

> The gap between environmental attitudes and behavior specifically is largely explicable by the alienation of modern daily living from the processes of extraction and production, as well as by a lack of felt urgency among even the moderately well-off, not to mention the truly affluent. . . . Everyone wants a safe and attractive environment, but enough citizens—poll respondents, anyhow—are buffered from immediate bad effects to make environmental welfare seem more like an amenity to be expected than an emergency that calls for drastic changes in behavior. ("Ecoglobalist Affects" 231)

Cortez employs the blues to speak out for those who are experiencing the ecological emergencies of our current day, those who cannot escape the aftermath of extraction and production. Her surrealism commands mental space in a world saturated with mass media and entertainment. Disruptive, memorable, and unexpected images in angry tones push the reader/listener to expand their ecological consciousness and think with an epistemological orientation that is not stunted by the alienation of modern daily living. Those who are in ecological crisis may find in Cortez's poetry artful acknowledgment and advocacy. Those sheltered from ecological crisis may find their buffer eroding from her acidic vision.

Cortez closes the gap between the ecological haves and have-nots with her hallmark interest in Africa. In addition, as a blues artist she engenders an understanding of Africa as a crucial and continuing part of the geography of the blues. Gerhard Kubik explains, "Blues is an African-American tradition that developed under certain social conditions on U.S. American soil, in the Deep South. It did not develop as such in Africa. And yet it is a phenomenon belonging essentially to the African cultur[al] world" (197). Kubik's description makes it possible to identify the specificity of the blues'

African Americanness while also understanding it as an African cultural phenomenon. Forging connections to Africa was a significant part of Black Arts Movement artistry and activism. Cortez comments that she and her counterparts in the Black Arts Movement "were interested in exploring African languages, forms, and cultures. We wanted to change the system, secure the future, and move forward" (Ruffin, "Freedom of Expression," 27). After the Black Arts Movement waned, Cortez remained committed to institution building that reflected an Africa-positive consciousness. In 1991, she established the Organization of Women Writers of Africa with Ghanian writer Ama Ata Aidoo. Among other activities, the organization helped sponsor the conferences "Yari Yari: Black Women Writers and the Future" (1997) and "Yari Yari Pamberi: Black Women Writers Dissecting Globalization" (2004),[5] which brought together women of African ancestry from numerous countries. Yet Cortez's focus on Africa and its diaspora occurs with dedication to multicultural dialogue and partnership. Barbara Christian notes, "Cortez has traveled all over the world reading her poetry; and in the process, she has forged those connections . . . that help us see how our histories, whether we live in Chile, Harlem, or Nigeria, are related. . . . She connects the art, experience and resistance of people of color all over the world" (237). Activism and creativity support her belief that the "blues talks about and has respect for the struggles of the past and is definitely concerned with the present and future. It talks about Black culture and reinvestigates the African experience as encountered all over the world. We are piecing together our story, recombining different African literary and musical forms and experimenting" (Cortez and the Firespitters, *Taking the Blues Back Home*, 2). In this comment, Cortez lays forth her ambition for the blues: she wishes that it not only rehearse a record of the past but also that it progress to meet the demands of the present and future. Choosing the term "reinvestigate," she hearkens to the original U.S. cultures that created the blues and contemporary black cultures throughout Africa and its diaspora whose experiences can be interpreted through a blues epistemology.

As Buell writes, "To think 'environmentally' or 'ecologically' requires thinking 'against' or 'beyond' nationness" ("Ecoglobalist Affects" 227). Forced and voluntary migration before and after the trans-Atlantic slave trade predisposed people of African descent to a transnational consciousness. Ethiopianism, the Niagara Movement, Garveyism, pan-Africanism, and negritude are just a few transnational traditions within Africa and its

diaspora. What Buell describes as "ecoglobalism" ("a whole-earth way of thinking and feeling about environmentality" ["Ecoglobalist Affects" 227]) articulates itself with a firm commitment to the African and diaspora world in Cortez's corpus. This registers not only as an outgrowth of Cortez's cultural identity but also as a concern that so many places within the African and diaspora world are beset by the ecological consequences of pollution-based industrialism and rapacious consumerism. To confront the ecological calamities the African world faces, Cortez calls on the blues.

Cortez combines the geographic materiality of Africa and its diaspora in her poem "Drying Spit Blues." In doing so, she again underscores the ability of the blues to speak to both historic and present-day phenomena in various locations such as "howling Sudan," "Memphis," "Ethiopia," and "spreading Saharas" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 37–38). The term "blues" represents the despondency onset by continual battles with imperialism, war, invasion, famine, and other crises. Although the brief mention of "Anna Nzinga," an Angolan queen and military leader who fought against Portuguese colonialization for several decades, suggests that resistance to these devastating phenomena can be achieved, the overall mood of the poem is dreadful. Again, her incorporation of surrealist nonhuman animal imagery is a key tool in accomplishing this effect. "Pulsing green roosters," "goatheads of death," "dead crows," "sculpted slugs," "silver ants on lower lids painted charcoal," "bullface throat slitters," "lizard juice," "widowfish entering flies," and "a circle of jackals cocked on the moon" accompany the fear that "once again warships rush to other ports / and once again relief is too late / and once again [there is] a shriveling solution" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 37–38). The animal images connote nonhuman nature that is absurd, reviled, or aggressive, yet contextualizing this record of decimation and despair within the blues tradition suggests that Cortez's creative documentation and lamentation may help transform these circumstances, for part of the purpose in doing the blues is to transform the conditions that engender them.

In a critique of Cortez's poem "They Came Again in 1970 and 1980," which is "about the effect of missionaries and scientists on 'developing countries' in Africa," Kimberly N. Brown concludes, "Land is personified in the black body. Thus the abuse of the human body equals the abuse of the land" (72). Land and human bodies are Cortez's subject elsewhere as well. Twenty repetitions of the couplet "They want the oil / But they don't want the people" make up the poem "Nigerian/American Rela-

tions" (*Firespitter* 26); "they" refers to "American[s]" whose oil-dependent lifestyles hinge on the extraction of raw materials from places such as Nigeria. The blunt contrast of desire only for "oil" but not "the people" describes an environmental attitude which overlooks the calamity that is created for those whose lives are caught within the crossfire of exploitive resource extraction such as slain environmental leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni people of southern Nigeria. In these two poems, what I have called a human-sensitive approach to ecological subjects reveals the disparities in the experience of being human. This kind of approach does not preclude an awareness of nonhuman nature, and it honors indigenous perspectives that do not allow for strict divisions between humans and land. Africa serves as a keystone continent in Cortez's aesthetic. Culturally it is her motherland; ecologically it is a place that necessitates sophisticated thinking which does not presume either a uniform experience of humanness or that human beings and the rest of nature must be at odds with one another.

Conclusion: Blues State of Mind

The conditions that shaped the blues can be understood as apocalyptic. Yes, Africans who were part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade may have indeed been enslaved in Africa. However, they faced a violent end to their life on the continent, and, if they survived the Middle Passage, they faced a violent beginning to a difficult life with a questionable end. In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, a classic study of African American culture, Amiri Baraka describes that the "customs, attitudes, [and] desires [of Africans imported for enslavement in the New World] were shaped to a different place, a radically different life" (1). Blues are one repository of African American responses to this cultural and environmental rupture: the artistic tradition of people who had to reshape themselves to a radically different place. The blues provide evidence of subsequent generations of African Americans' attempts to root themselves in North America.

The apocalyptic elements of Cortez's poetry are rooted in this blues-inflected history. They are also grounded in a larger understanding of similar experiences among other marginalized human groups. Her corpus supports the idea that there are those who live in postapocalyptic ecological conditions and that these conditions will spread if radical ecological, sociopolitical, and economic change is overlooked. Surrealist elements

and an urgent tone yielding repeated images of a natural world plagued by attack, destruction, and decay pervade Cortez's work.

Numerous ecocritical scholars have identified Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) as a landmark book that shaped subsequent texts with ecological apocalyptic discourse and awareness. Images of a natural world besieged by the toxic behaviors of human beings make Cortez's poetry reflective of Carson's tradition, yet is apocalypticism a useful approach to effect social change? Does Cortez's work and that of other apocalyptic authors simply leave readers disillusioned with the horror of the worlds she describes? Reflecting on the aim of Carson's work, Greg Garrard writes, "Carson's alternative [to apocalypse] is not an ecocentric or anti-interventionist vision, but rather a pragmatic environmentalism in which limited, targeted chemical pesticides combine with biological controls in an integrated pest-management approach" (95–96). Garrard notes that many deep ecologists find this combined chemical and biological solution a dangerous consolation. However, it demonstrates that even out of apocalyptic discourse can come solutions. Amy M. Patrick recalibrates discussions of Carson's text by suggesting it has "threads of both apocalyptic and precautionary rhetoric," noting that the precautionary thread yields "discussions of connectedness, scientific uncertainty, and health" and "joins itself well to issues of concern in environmental justice and policy" (151, 152). Patrick calls for increased attention to precautionary literature because in it we find authors "who do not cry crisis and end of the world so much as advocate precaution for an uncertain and potentially difficult future" (152).

The combination of apocalyptic and precautionary rhetoric gives Cortez's poetry its power. In the apocalyptic vein of her poetry, there are clear and evil forces that endanger the well-being of the planet. She avoids elusiveness and identifies unmistakable problems with wholly guilty perpetrators. Cortez frequently identifies the human groups she feels are responsible for the impending ecological apocalypse against which her poetry so often warns.

Human predators are identified in her poem "Have a Good Day," with the ironic contrast of the title's commonplace salutation with images such as "the cult of cocoa stealers / the obscene men running goldmines / and lime factories" who are "descending on us with a platter of syphilis." Petroleum and iron companies, rubber plantations, textile mills, and school

systems are also vilified as human institutions that make exploitation as routine as a ritualized saying (*Firespitter* 17). "Advancing sands," "polluted sewage," "dust demons," "dying timber," and an "upper atmosphere of nitrogen" are the problems of "Push Back the Catastrophes" (*Poetic Magnetic* 26). Yet, the gains of obliterating "sickness sadness poverty / exploitation destabilization / illiteracy and bombing" are undeniable. In defeating "the catastrophers" who cause these things, it is possible

> To breathe clean air
> to drink pure water to plant new crops
> to soak up the rain to wash off the stink
> to hold this body and soul together in peace
> (*Poetic Magnetic* 26)

She highlights "catastrophers" with binary language in the poem "There It Is"; this time the "ruling class" serve as the "they" who endanger "we." The downtrodden are warned that "they" have a clear agenda and do not have regard for differences within the "we" group. Cortez writes,

> My friend
> they don't care
> if you're an individualist
> a leftist a rightist
> a shithead or a snake
> They will try to exploit you
> absorb you confine you
> disconnect you isiolate [*sic*] you
> or kill you
> (*Firespitter* 38)

The rhetorical merit of this kind of characterization of any of the parties involved is arguable, but the demonization of "they" is in accord with what Cortez sees as the severity of their actions. She asserts, "The life blood of the earth [is] almost dead in / the greedy mouth of imperialism" and "[they will] try to pump all the resources of the world / into their own veins / and fly off into the wild blue yonder to / pollute another planet" (*Firespitter* 39).

Her uncompromising accusation of groups presumed guilty seizes the truth-telling power of the blues to identify precisely conditions that call for

change. The precautionary thread of her work readies her audience to act by first encouraging them to adopt a blues epistemology. Rather than an artifact meant to be nostalgized, Cortez sees the blues as an energizing, pliable, epistemological force capable of addressing the changing ecological circumstances of our current day. Indeed, the realness of the blues always returns to the physical, material world with the aid of an epistemological response aimed at transcendence or at least survival. Kelley writes, "To call this 'protest poetry' misses the point. It is a complete revolt, a clarion call for a new way of life. Cortez not only lifts the proverbial rug covering the mess created by our global systems of domination, but she also opens our imaginations to new possibilities in some unlikely places" (189). Cortez sets out to recorporealize the urgency of radical, ecological change with her use of the blues. Indeed, she argues that living is endangered; artful construction in her poetry brings awareness to this bare, disconcerting fact. Her blues aesthetic dwells in a truth that is discomforting in order to muster the epistemological might for a libratory transformation. The urgency of her poems commands that her readers/listeners put their own bodies on notice, for the aftermath of ecological apocalypse is dire. Cortez writes,

> if we don't resist
> if we don't organize and unify and
> get the power to control our own lives
> Then we will wear
> the exaggerated look of captivity
> the stylized look of submission
> the bizarre look of suicide
> the dehumanized look of fear
> and the decomposed look of repression
> forever and ever and ever
> And there it is.
> (*Firespitter* 39)

Our interdependent destinies mean we all have the blues of which Cortez speaks. She affirms the human responsibility for creating ecological crises and the human potential to avoid further ecological apocalypse by inhabiting the self-centered power of blues epistemology. Finally, Jayne Cortez trusts that her readers/listeners will find the solutions to the problems she identifies, for because

> the river turtle
> does not breathe like
> a slithering boa constrictor. . . . The slash of a barracuda
> is not like
> the gulp of a leaping whale
> The speech of a tiger shark
> is not like
> the bark of an eagle-fish

her poetry encourages us to "find [our] own voice & use it" (*Jazz Fan Looks Back* 89).

CONCLUSION

After Levee Disaster

Learning from a Sinned-against City

Evacuated as if criminal
Rescued by neighbors
Shot by soldiers

Adamant they belong
Suheir Hammad, "on refuge and language" (2007)

In the continuity of blacks in crisis amid the discontinuity of ecological and manufactured disaster crises, will it matter if we are called "Americans" rather than "refugees"? When and where is nation-state membership a passport that possesses tangible value in terms of mobility and survivability, a value that state and civil society must respect for bodies first and foremost recognized as black and impoverished rather than *human*? And who or what can demand, maintain, and enforce that respect when it has been denied?

Joy James, "Political Literacy and Voice" (2007)

Dirge: Changing the Terms of Citizenship[1]

Published in 1949, Aldo Leopold's essay "The Land Ethic" offers a powerful conceptual frame for ecological progress: citizenship. At the same time, it asserts a premature sense of completion in the area of human relationships and "ecological evolution" (238). Turning to ancient Greece to make his case, he argues that humans have advanced beyond Odysseus's time, when slave girls could be punished with death because they were understood as property. This, of course, overlooks the more contemporary experience of enslavement and subsequent racial discrimination in

Leopold's own homeland. However, there is merit in his suggestion that humans must continue to evolve ecologically by extending an ethical relationship to land, plants, and animals. Leopold writes, "A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such. . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (239–40). The necessity for such a land ethic has only been exacerbated by global climate change, yet painting the ethical advancement of humans with such a broad brush that gross differences in the human experience of citizenship are disguised neither encourages the adoption of a land ethic nor reveals the ways in which the exploitation of humans and nonhumans are intertwined. It only gives us a uniform picture of human experience that doesn't exist. For instance, television broadcasts and print media reports of the human struggles of the civil rights movement and the American Indian movement would come well after the publication of "The Land Ethic." The presence of these images in the mass media was central in popularizing the concept of human rights, which, in turn, continued the project of expanding a human ethic. Movements such as these encouraged the marginalized to actively shape the concept of citizenship. Thus, Leopold's promising conceptual frame of citizenship needs to be informed by continuing human and nonhuman ecological injustices to be effective. To evolve ecologically, we need to expand ethics within and between human and nonhuman biotic communities at the same time.

In the twenty-first century, no other events during the George W. Bush presidency symbolized the deadly commingling of fragile national and ecological citizenship for the human community more than those surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 Levee Disaster. The criminally negligent governmental response to the disasters in New Orleans showcased the second-class citizenship of the racially marginalized or poor. Although some people attribute the government's failures to phenomena other than racism, few doubt that America's history of racism could be seen during the 2005 Levee Disaster, which left a world-renowned city barely recognizable and its citizens branded "refugees."

Documentary films chronicling the lives of those who did and did not survive the disasters and their aftermath capture the collision of discourse around race, ecology, and citizenship while they function to keep the story

of New Orleans alive in our collective memory. They help us understand why New Orleans is both exceptional and emblematic. The city's unique ordering of human hierarchy challenged simplistic black or white narratives of antebellum southern life and allowed for a sizable population of successful free people of color to have a significant presence in the city's social and economic fabric. Although the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling meant that New Orleans reflected national practices that stigmatized anyone with one drop of black blood, the city is an emblem of our increasing need to better understand race and human relations in a rapidly urbanizing world. Special for its endangered nonhuman natural resources and heralded human cultures, New Orleans is also indicative of the ecological interdependence of city, state, nation, and world. For these reasons, the lessons to be had from the city's past and present are the same: cities concentrate people in ways that make it necessary to work toward a just vision for human interactions and wise guidelines for human relationships with the rest of the "biotic community" (Leopold 240).

Interviewed by filmmaker and journalist Lolis Eric Elie on a debris-ridden street while helicopters hover above, Brenda Marie Osbey ekes out the strength and foresight to see beyond the 2005 disasters' aftermath. She explains, "This is a destruction and an exodus truly of biblical proportion. But it isn't a greater catastrophe, it isn't a greater disaster, than we are a people. And that's what I think has to come through: that we hold on to this city for who we are and what we are and that everywhere we go we take this city with us, we take the spirit of this city with us. We take the spirit of this city's heroes with us and a will to live and fight again" (*Faubourg Tremé*). Osbey believes firmly that the people can triumph over the heinous sins of governmental inaction and ineptitude visited upon them. Her comments suggest that while the people of New Orleans may indeed locate themselves outside of it, they have the power to carry the lessons offered by the spirit of the city and its heroes with them. According to the New Orleans poet laureate, this spiritual resource will be necessary for future struggles. Blacks' history of struggle also undergirds the comments of Joy James, Brown University professor of Africana studies. In an age of "ecological and manufactured disaster crises," she questions whether "nation-state membership" has any relevance for the survival of a people already stigmatized by the terms "black and impoverished." James's exasperated question about "who or what" can police a nation that taxes

citizens it leaves to die in "government-enabled"[2] disasters spotlights the need for a discussion of race and the terms of citizenship in a time of increased ecological calamity. Our political literacy can no longer stand apart from our ecological literacy.

Post–Levee Disaster documentary films such as Dawn Logsdon's and Elie's *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* focus on race (in particular, "blackness") and national citizenship, allowing for a specific understanding of the city and a larger appreciation of America's ecological history and present. Their film, and others like it, depicts African Americans as fighting constantly to obtain full national citizenship, beginning in the antebellum era and climaxing with the 2005 Levee Disaster. Implicit to these films is the ecological story of a human group trying to root itself in a place on Earth, despite huge barriers from human systems. Ultimately, the films show the worst that can happen from asynchronous ecological and national thinking. Examining the presence of race, nation, and ecology in a selection of these films illuminates the significance of their documentary or historical function and the call they create for imaginative work that may help the world change the terms of citizenship.

Musician Glen David Andrews underscores the trauma of denied citizenship felt by New Orleanians after the disasters. He explains,

> Right now, you're going to need a lot psychiatric help. And I'm gonna be one of the first people to get in line. 'Cause I still can't come to grasp with [the fact that] the church I was baptized in: gone. The cemetery where all my family is: gone. I sincerely hope nobody asks me to say the 'Pledge of Allegiance' or play . . . 'God Bless America' or any of them dumb-ass songs again because I'm never going to play it because I don't feel like an American citizen. I know I'm not an American citizen in the eyes of the power that be. (*Faubourg Tremé*)

Andrews's comments capture the anguish felt by New Orleanians who are left to ask the question posed in the poem by Suheir Hammad quoted in this chapter's epigraph: "What do we pledge allegiance to?" (167). Yet Andrews's participation in the city's continuing music and parade traditions demonstrate the power human culture has to connect people to geographies even without the benefits of fully honored national citizenship. Although the despondency in his statements speak definitively of the pain denied national citizenship can render, his tone and actions reveal that he

shares the outlook of the city residents in Hammad's poem: he is "adamant [that he] belongs" (Hammad 169).

Faubourg Tremé also documents the way people used print culture to actively shape the terms of citizenship. Specifically, it focuses on Paul Trevigne, founder of the "first Black daily newspaper in the United States": *L'Union*, later named *The Tribune*, which historian Laura Rouzan declares as the "beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the South because it was vocal; it was articulated, and it was written"(*Faubourg Tremé*). Historian Eric Foner celebrates the writers' ideological work, calling them "proponents of an idea that we may take for granted . . . which is equality before the law for all Americans regardless of race. This is the origins of the concept of civil rights we understand today" (*Faubourg Tremé*). Framed by two eras of reconstruction (post–Civil War and post–Levee Disaster) and the story of two journalists, *Faubourg Tremé* spends the bulk of its time positioning New Orleans, especially the neighborhood of its title, as an overlooked harbinger of civil rights "that changed the course of American history." By the film's end, viewers feel as if New Orleans has this potential again. Speaking of post–Levee Disaster New Orleans, Elie remarks that "this is not the first time my community has been devastated and then abandoned by its government. In the past, we survived and came out stronger. What I'm wondering now is how can our past help us survive this time?" The resistance to dehumanization by enslaved and free people of color in New Orleans's past suggests that using words to popularize the idea of civil rights and shape the idea of citizenship may answer Elie's question in our age of eco-crisis.

The DVD cover of *Desert Bayou* explains "the most devastating thing about Katrina is what it revealed about America." Its stories about black evacuees and their postdisaster time spent in Utah reveal that America has racial narratives that go a long way in impacting the environmental experience. The oxymoronic title stems from the identification of people and environment: just as the film documents how six hundred black 2005 Levee Disaster survivors cope with radical environmental and cultural change after being flown to Utah, the film also tells how a racially white city and state attempt to appear racially accepting after the ecological catastrophe. Despite apparent goodwill on the part of many whites in Utah, the sins against displaced African American New Orleanians continue. The narrator summarizes the injustices that happened to the black evacuees as follows:

> Put on a plane and shipped to the almost entirely white state of Utah without their knowledge, upon arrival frisked, housed in a secure military base far from civilization and under curfew, subjected to criminal background checks after which erroneous findings were broadcast on the radio resulting in community panic . . . were this the experience of most Americans outrage would soon follow; however, for an African American from New Orleans it would simply appear to echo their everyday experience. (*Desert Bayou*)

The black evacuees' experience demonstrates that perceptions about race, nation, and ecology impact whatever geography in which a racialized person finds herself or himself.

This is true, in part, because of mass media's omnipresence. Rocky Anderson, former Salt Lake City mayor (2000–2008) remarks, "You saw an unbelievable, and I think a racist coverage by the media, leading this nation to think that all these African American people are raising utter hell [after the flooding], and none of it was true; not one bit of that was true. And yet that's still the impression in most people's minds in this country and that's because it was repeated over and over and over again in our nation's media" (*Desert Bayou*). The documentary films cited here definitely provide a counternarrative to these images; in particular, they document the ways in which endangered citizens, often unfairly criminalized as looters and potential threats, came to their own aid after the Levee Disaster, showing the power of the marginalized to meet their own needs. *Desert Bayou* also documents the decision by several former evacuees to take root in a new geography despite the misperceptions about them that the negative images created. Three of the four African American adults profiled decide to trade the subtropical, below-sea-level urban terrain of New Orleans for the semi-arid, mountain-surrounded urbanity of Salt Lake City, Utah, perched over four thousand feet above sea level.

Massive in length and scope, Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* contains an explicit discussion of fault. New Orleans City Council Member Cynthia Hedge-Morell says directly, "I tell people all the time: Katrina didn't do in [the city], the [U.S. Army] Corps of Engineers did. If they had built those levees, really to [withstand] Category 3 [hurricane strength], all of the residents of New Orleans would still be here" (*When the Levees Broke*). Hedge-Morell's comments underscore the danger in reducing the 2005 catastrophe to the phrase "Hurricane Katrina." It masks long-standing human contributions to the circumstances that led to the flooding of New Orleans. Robert Bea, professor of civil

and environmental engineering at the University of California–Berkeley, calls the 2005 Levee Disaster "the most tragic failure of a civil engineering system in the history of the United States." Yet the stinging indictment of the government for levee failures and delayed rescue efforts comes along with voices of caution that in no way release American citizens of responsibility. Terence Blanchard, trumpeter and New Orleanian, chides with "precautionary rhetoric" (Patrick 151), saying, "Everybody needs to understand that this is an American tragedy. It's not a tragedy for Louisiana or New Orleans, this is an American thing. Because, if it can happen to us, in New Orleans, it can happen anywhere in this country." His comments highlight the emblematic function of New Orleans and its potential to change the course of American history by energizing citizens to be proactive. Another New Orleanian trumpeter, Wynton Marsalis, highlights the dangers of a citizenry that does not hold its representatives accountable. He comments, "What is the government doing [after the Levee Disaster]? They trying to figure out how to hand out contracts, how to lower minimum wage so that the subcontractors can make all the money; steal money from me and you. Man, we're paying taxes! You understand what I'm saying? But they've been doing it. And we [are] stupid. We sit by and we let them do it. And we reelect 'em and that's what they do" (*When the Levees Broke*). Blanchard and Marsalis speak out of frustration born of governmental misdeeds, and at the same time they pinpoint that our republican government does not act alone: it relies on the permission of its citizens. Although the film documents residents determined to use the electoral process to express their demand for change, it leaves the audience wondering: what happens if we let our interest in protecting our planetary life-support systems inform our national citizenship? Also, just what else can citizens do to prevent such governmental wrongdoing in the future? What actions can we take beyond electoral politics that protect our interests as both ecological and national citizens?

Perhaps the first step is to give up environmental thinking. Environmental discussions of the past have been predicated on oppressive conceptions of humanity and the false idea that humans are not natural. When we think ecologically, we can appreciate the magnitude of our own fragility and recognize that people experience humanity in innumerable ways: as poor, rich, women, men, lesbian, transgendered, gay, differently abled, positively and negatively racialized. Ecological thinking gets us closer to a human-sensitive outlook that recognizes these differences and that also

includes the needs of nonhuman nature. By recording the colossal consequences of a lack of ecological thinking, post–Levee Disaster films show a range of people caught between imperfect national citizenship and, hence, unrealizable ecological citizenship.

Lee's film also contains the most dynamic discussion of ecology of the three films discussed here. The Gulf Coast's loss of wetlands, the ecological costs of negatively racialized cities and regions, increased hurricane strength because of global climate change, the undue ecological burden on the racialized and/or poor, and Louisiana's significant contributions to the nation's energy needs are all topics. The 2005 Levee Disaster ripped apart the illusion that American policies can march on with disregard to global climate change with no consequences for its citizenry. It also divested people of the idea that citizens in a participatory democracy can ignore ecological realities; governments cannot be counted on as the sole arbiters of ecological knowledge and responsibility.

Additionally, *When the Levees Broke* impresses because of its ability to hold a discussion of race, ecology, and nation together as it issues a call to America's, if not the world's, citizens: Do not think of the Levee Disaster as an anomaly; if people act accordingly, it can serve as a precautionary event preventing future disasters. All three films also detail the beauty of New Orleans's human culture, particularly that of African Americans. In doing so, the films honor the toll the disasters have on the human community while positing the idea that human culture can reflect our ability to learn lessons from this sinned-against city. The only way to absolve the nation of the sins of post–Levee Disaster New Orleans is for all its inhabitants to take heed to its lessons. Michael Eric Dyson is right in *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*: one lesson is that America's "ownership society" can mean that "class and caste" determine one's ability to survive disaster. However, other lessons stem from the fact that everyone bears risk in a world in which citizens and nations ignore ecological realities. An expanding sense of ethics in the human and nonhuman biotic community can help individuals and nations alter the trends that suggest future ecological calamities.

Three years after the 2005 Levee Disaster, the election of U.S. President Barack Obama signaled a landmark shift in the discourse of race, nation, and citizenship. His election brought a moment some African Americans assumed would never come: one in which a black man was elected to the highest leadership position in the nation. Ever-present questions about

symbols of African American national belonging were forever changed. Obama tempered the jubilance of the crowd gathered for an election night victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park with a balance between elation and solemnity. He said, "Even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime–two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century" (Obama, "Speech," 2008). Obama's victory speech did not overlook the "planet in peril" that makes work on behalf of ecological belonging so necessary for everyone regardless of nation.

President Obama shifted the discourse of race, nation, and citizenship to the realm of ecology with another landmark moment: his nomination of Lisa Jackson for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator. A native New Orleanian who drove family members out of the city before Hurricane Katrina, Jackson is the first African American to be confirmed to head the U.S. EPA. Although trained as a chemical engineer, Jackson speaks religiously regarding her ecological outlook, echoing George Washington Carver's combination of spirituality and science. In a 2007 interview, Jackson remarked, "The Katrina experience made me realize that you can't fight it; you have to accept what God has in store for you. I truly believe that God gave us this world and we have a moral obligation not to turn around and give the next generations a trash heap that they can't live off of. This earth is supposed to sustain us and in response, we're supposed to respect it" (Nash 9). Jackson has made a concerted effort to listen to communities severely affected by environmental injustices, and her brief tenure as EPA administrator suggests that she may do something to alleviate the government's profound betrayal of its citizenry both in New Orleans and the nation at large.

Yet even as Obama's election and Jackson's position may incline African Americans to feel their foothold in national citizenship is strengthening, these historic events come at a time when Earth's residents as a whole are experiencing greater awareness of global climate change and numerous other ecological crises. Just as advanced African American membership in and leadership of a national citizenry seems possible, ecological citizenship looms as more and more pressing.

The terms of national citizenship have changed significantly since the 2005 Levee Disaster, and the United States may now have a federal government that will make gains in alleviating rather than aggravating ecological injustice. At the same time, the documentary films cited here suggest

that it is not only New Orleans that should be under reconstruction but also the nation: a conceptual reconstruction that rebuilds what it means to be human with ecological sustainability in mind. We are at a point when we need "a new human nature freed of the foreclosure and egotism of the past," to return to an idea from Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo (35). This human nature must be built free of racist ideology and biotic and regional chauvinism if we are to better meet human and nonhuman needs.

Visionary literature is part of the artistic response that can guide this reconstruction. Art promises to give us the language and images to confront these realities and shift to beliefs, practices, and policies that bespeak ecological progress. This is the art of ecological citizenship. The texts in *Black on Earth* move us closer to this form of citizenship because they depict the ways in which the marginalized have struggled to express their biophilic aspirations and obtain ecological belonging within the context of nation. Acknowledging the need for synchronous ecological and national thinking, let us read, view, and listen to the artists, our visionaries, who help shape the terms of citizenship with ecology in mind: a form of citizenship that may sustain our life-support system and our place in it.

Second Line: Vision for Ecological Citizenship

The idea of ecological citizenship fascinates, especially as concern over global ecological security escalates. These concerns relate directly to growing alarm over global economic security. In fact, Sherilyn MacGregor indicts the "rise of neoliberalism" with "perpetuat[ing] the myth that we are individual consumers, investors, homeowners, and taxpayers rather than citizens with shared interests" ("Three Ships" 85). She concludes, "In this climate we need to cultivate and defend the concept of citizenship more than ever—and to make its practice an essential part of the environmental agenda" (85).[3] Ecological citizenship has the potential to foster ecological awareness and entitlement that moves people to protect not only their interests but also the interests of other humans and nonhumans to whom they are interconnected. It may give humans what is recommended in the title of Ursula K. Heise's book, a "sense of place and [a] sense of planet." A vibrant, active, ecological citizenship can invigorate the marginalized with clarity of need, purpose, and global belonging in this time of ecological urgency. Discussing a related term, scholar-activist Vandana Shiva declares that "Earth democracy" is

> the concern for human and nonhuman species come together in a coherent, nonconflicting whole that provides an alternative to the worldview of corporate globalization . . . Earth Democracy is the universal story of our times, in our different places. It pulsates with the limitless potential of an unfolding universe even while it addresses the real threats to our very survival as a species. It is hope in a time of hopelessness, it brings forth peace in a time of wars without end, and it encourages us to love life fiercely and passionately at a time when leaders and the media breed hatred and fear. (Shiva 8–9)

Even though Shiva's description of it is romantic, "Earth democracy" sets forth ideals (e.g., "All species, peoples, and cultures have intrinsic worth," "Diversity in nature and culture must be defended," and "living economies and economic democracy") worth the work, particularly for those whose ecological marginalization has been acute. The notion of citizenship in an Earth democracy implies collaboration at local, state, national, and international levels to forge individual practices and institutions that work toward sustainability and a more just distribution of ecological burden and beauty.

The move toward sustainable societal models requires a dramatic shift in thinking about citizenship itself. As Marc J. Smith and Piya Pangsapa point out, "For over two centuries, citizenship has been fixated upon rights and entitlements, glossing over duties and obligations" (9). Unjust experiences of rights and entitlements have created disparities that alienate people from ecological affinity, which inhibits the idea of citizenship; the marginalized will have little interest in ecological duties and obligations if flaws in human ethics continue to go unaddressed. Therefore, art that addresses these disparities and forges new, progressive images is central to fostering ecological citizenship. This multidimensional art can speak to the experiences of those declared ecologically deviant while it also presents concrete examples of ecological agency. Carl Safina explains that "we have to try every key we have in our effort to unlock each heart" (185). Although he affirms the role of science-based information in people's ecological understanding, he also makes clear that people need "value-based channels of understanding, such as story, personal experience, metaphor and song [along with other channels such as] allegory, anecdote, image, community, ceremony, theater, [and] faith" (185). If we expect people to become ecological citizens, then we must have images through which they can honor and question themselves and any forces (hierarchies of nation, race, class, sexuality, or gender) that complicate their attempts to

express their ecological belonging. Additionally, if we expect people to act as participating, rather than passive, ecological and national citizens, then we must have the sociopolitical systems that support ecological and national belonging. The literature in this study honors the process of acknowledging personal, communal, and institutional ecological failures while identifying the means by which we may reach a concrete expression of ecological citizenship, one that coexists with improved national citizenship and greater respect for the global community (including noncitizens contributing to nations outside their homes).

The literature in *Black on Earth* has much conceptual material to offer in building a bridge to that vision. Whether it was written in the distant past or authored in our time, the literature here clarifies racial burden and defines opportunities for ecological beauty. It helps readers understand what must be done to meet the needs of the ecologically disenfranchised and assist those who wish to share the planet on fully democratic grounds. It acknowledges past and current wrongs; presents artfully the topics of race, ecology, and nation; endorses human biodiversity as enriching the goal of a sustainable planet; and shows how the marginalized express ecological desire. It implies that out of the burden-and-beauty paradox can be born a new era of ecological responsibility and agency founded on an expanding human and land ethic. As Carl Anthony notes, "We can learn to use the environmental and social difficulties our communities face as opportunities to awaken and bring forth our finest human qualities: awareness, compassion, humor, wisdom, and fearless dedication to truth. If we choose this path, we can deepen connections within and among communities, and between communities and the natural world, in our common struggle for ecological democracy" (Faber, "Foreword"). The insights of African American ecoliterature advance the "common struggle for ecological democracy" and set the stage for the ecological righting that needs to take place if the human species is to survive. Through the prisms of race, work, ancestors, religion, myth, and the blues, we read and hear images that allow us to build on their ecological insight. They are images that take into account the human and nonhuman systems that determine survival.

The writers and oral history contributors of chapter 1 ("'Toil and Soil': Authorizing Work and Enslavement") authorized the voices of the enslaved on the subject of nature. In reflecting the ecological outlook of those who are held against their will as unpaid laborers, the Federal Writers' Project Former Slave Narratives' contributors, George Moses Horton,

and Albery Whitman demonstrate that even oppressive human systems cannot obliterate the desire for eco-belonging. In addition, they posit work as a foundation of eco-thought, challenging the outmoded lens of leisure as the primary way through which we express and understand ecological belonging. They leave readers pondering, how can work help people express ecological and societal belonging? With President Barack Obama's plan to "repower America" and stimulate the U.S. economy through green jobs, we may indeed see an administration that puts humans to work with sustainability in mind rather than with ecology out of sight.

The neo–slave poetry of chapter 2 ("York, Harriet, and George: Writing Ecological Ancestors") celebrates historical African Americans who experienced enslavement as exemplary ecological agents. In doing so, Frank X Walker, Quraysh Lansana, and Marilyn Nelson expand the landscape of celebrated ancestors and definitions of ecological agency. This broadens our ability to acknowledge and build upon accumulated human wisdom. In addition, it encourages Americans to remove racial blind spots and include people from marginalized groups in their understanding of the nation's ecological past.

Religion has activated social change for many marginalized groups, just as it has been a tool for their oppressors. The primary authors of chapter 3 ("Animal Nature: Finding Ecotheology") wrestle with this bittersweet history to formulate religious outlooks with sustainability at their center; their work suggests that religion can be a part of the solution to ecological problems rather than dogma that distracts people from confronting earthly reality. Because Octavia Butler's and Alice Walker's perspectives grow out of conceptions of human nature, they remind us that religion is one of the most frequent and common modes of thought about what is human and what guidance humans need; for that reason, it can be a source of correction and liberation. Religion is also the source of some of our most motivating stories and concepts; hence, widely held ecotheologies promise to have significant impact on popularizing sustainability. Walker's and Butler's provocative gesture of synthesizing ideas outside the religious status quo with biblical ideas demonstrates a need for religious pluralism in ecological debate.

Henry Dumas and Percival Everett provide imaginative writing about myth that shows we have myths in need of destruction and myths in need of construction if ecological citizenship is our goal. Everett's work underscores that in order to move toward the benefits of ecological thinking we

must undo the racist myths that have fragmented our understanding of the human family and humans' role in the larger planetary world. Dumas's writing demonstrates the benefits of creating constructive myths that encourage the marginalized to identify with forms of nature. Dumas's adolescent characters represent the need for stories that will bind us to Earth and propel us into a low-carbon adulthood. Everett's humor provokes laughter at the absurdity of destructive myths that may help us minimize the impact of conditions that drum up disabling despair.

Jayne Cortez's written, recorded, and performed poetry represents a multimedia approach to inhabiting the grim realities of those on the ecological margins. Her bottom-up societal perspective uses the blues as an epistemological tool for cultivating the public consensus for ecological progress.

The ecoliterature in *Black on Earth* contributes to the difficult task of building global ecological citizenship by giving voice to a human group who has much to gain from it. People may still fight for national belonging, yet the literature here suggests it is beneficial to promote the global awareness that should inform ecological debate. Invigorated by a vision of ecological citizenship grounded in national and international realities, we may be able to make the most of the nation even as we strive to create the global systems that exist in conjunction with it. As Alice Walker reminds us, "It has been proved that the land can exist without the country–and be better for it; it has not been proved . . . that the country can exist without the land" (*Living by the Word* 146).

Applying the lessons I learned from this literature and New Orleans gave me firsthand experience of the arts' power to express ecological beauty and the joys of expressing ecological citizenship. In 2006, the Bates College Museum of Art challenged faculty and students to use both the museum and the surrounding community as sites for artistic reflection on the question "What is *green* and what is *sustainable*?" Bridgette Bartlett, a community leader in Maine; Seitu Jones, a visual artist in Minnesota; and Bruce Barnes, a musical artist and National Park Service ranger in Louisiana collaborated with me to explore this question.

We decided that the urban, community garden, a space that melds rural and metropolitan realities, human and nonhuman nature, would be our muse. The garden seemed the perfect place to get beyond the human/nature divide that frustrated us all. In our conversations, Bridgette pondered, "Was it worth working to sustain the ecology of the earth if there was still

injustice and inequality?" (Ruffin, "Make Way," 17). Managing the emotional and social upheaval of post–Levee Disaster New Orleans, Bruce stressed that "African American communities in areas like New Orleans are in just as much danger as the snail darter or spotted owl." Seitu added that "it is [his] long-term goal to 'greenline' inner-city neighborhoods" in direct opposition to the history of "redlining" that placed racial and economic restrictions on inner-city residents (Ruffin, "Make Way," 17). Aiming to explore human beings, especially urban dwellers, as part of nature led us to the idea that sustainable art could come from the "garden roots": a symbolic place that celebrates urban gardening and emphasizes a union of both professional artists and everyday people making art that honors people and plant affinity.

We zeroed in on one human group's relationship to a particular plant for the museum exhibit. Collard greens are the stuff of legend in African American cultures. To celebrate this, Seitu transformed pieces of cardboard from a local appliance store and cast-off paint into an awe-inspiring, large-scale collard green. To further reflect the historical depth of this relationship between collard and community, I suggested that Seitu include text from the Federal Writers' Project Former Slave Narratives on the plant's leaves. Integrating these words on Seitu's visual contribution showcased oft-neglected voices from the past in art from the present that honors the knowledge and sustenance found in forced and voluntary agricultural labor. The comments included from Federal Writers' Project Former Slave Narrators were as follows:

> Collard leaves we put on head for misery and again we made a poultice with them for boils. . . . Once when I had a carbuncle on the back of my neck, and they said I was goin' to die, I cured myself with it. –Warner Willis, enslaved in Louisiana

> Some of the times he did not have enough food to eat and so when the time came to feed the cows he took a part of their food (a mixture of cotton seed, collard stalks, and small ears of corn) and ate it when it night came. –interviewer record of George Womble, enslaved in Georgia

> Wet collard leaf tied on an aching head or skin sore will run de pain off. . . . –Vinnie Brunson, enslaved in Texas

Collard greens are revered by many because they helped sustain enslaved, rural African Americans through routine hunger and inadequate medical

Workshop participants create a group poem.
Photo by Elizabeth Mitchell.

Participants showcase results of the visual art workshop.
Photo by Elizabeth Mitchell.

Visual artist Seitu Jones creates a collard green costume.
Photo by Elizabeth Mitchell.

People and Plants Parade Day.
Photo by Elizabeth Mitchell.

Kimberly N. Ruffin leads the People and Plants Parade.
Photo by Elizabeth Mitchell.

People and Plants Parade on the streets of Lewiston, Maine.
Photo by Elizabeth Mitchell.

care. Also, they were an edible connection to West African agricultural traditions. In the present day, collard greens (and other varieties of greens such as mustard, turnip, and kale) remain popular in both rural and urban African American households. Bruce upheld the near-sacred place collard greens have in contemporary African America in his song "Country Greens":

> Oh Lord, I love me a mess of them good ole country greens.
> They rich in protein and good on the vitamin A
> Sometimes I wonder why don't the whole world see it my way
> You'll live a lot longer if you start right now eatin' them greens today.
> (Ruffin, "Make Way," 18)

As an outdoor companion to the installation, several collard green seedlings were planted in the traffic circle in front of the museum.

Next, we needed to make a crucial step out from the museum and Bates campus and into the surrounding city. Lots to Gardens bridged these two worlds. Founded by Kirsten Walter, Lots to Gardens (LTG) is a small nonprofit within Sisters of Charity Health Systems that focuses on healthy food and organic, urban gardening. The sixteen community gardens supported by LTG meet the needs of residents who want to grow food as they grow community. Bridgette, LTG's education and outreach coordinator, explained, "The community gardens are more than just a place to grow food; they are also a place that brings different people together into a common space where they can share ideas, experiences and recipes."

Poetry and visual art workshops helped us foster community and prepare for our culminating event: a New Orleans–inspired "People and Plants" parade in August 2007. At our poetry workshop we featured established writers representing several cultures: Frank X Walker, Wendell Berry, Erica Jong, Joseph Bruchac, and Lucille Clifton, among others. Writing exercises also encouraged workshop participants to produce collective and individually authored poetry. We had fun with words and images, and we did it together. For the visual art workshops, Seitu educated folks about the people-and-plant relationship profiled inside and outside the museum. He then led participants in the creation of their own visual art. No one had to be convinced they had artistic potential; people swarmed over the materials like a kindergarten class in old shirts chasing down finger paints. The toxic pitfalls of the iconic string of plastic Mardi Gras beads are animated vividly in David Redmon's documentary *Mardi*

Gras: Made in China. We sought to be earth-friendly in our choice of materials as we also sought to accommodate the human need for adornment and artistry. Therefore, repurposed cardboard, book jacket covers, and old seeds were the primary resources for vegetable and fruit masks.

Thankfully, weather was on the side of the parade. We had a sparkling day of mild temperatures and bright sun. High energy and light traffic helped out too. After a memorial collard-green planting at one of Lots to Gardens' sites, we were treated to a praise poem to the "world's favorite fruit" by Hanan Ahmed, a local Somali American teen:

> Luscious, Juicy mango fruit!
> How do we guard you from the swine?
> King of fruits, without clash
> To you we all humbly salute!
> Ripe, and unripe in forms many,
> Enjoyed universally by all and any!
> Delicious and sweet just like sugar cane,
> Protecting you can be wildly insane!
> King of all the fruit! How you enchant!
> O' flavorful Emperor! Wishes you grant!
> You are the fruit of gold,
> Witness to battle and thunder storm
> Gazing at onlookers from the compound wall,
> How gracefully you sway amidst trees tall!
> (Ruffin, "Make Way," 19)

The passion in Hanan's poem upholds the rich connections we have to the plant world. Our ecological condition requires that we make this passion tangible for as many people as possible. Although ecological citizenship in our age of crisis requires difficult, indeed burdensome, discussions and decisions, it also gives us a reason for egalitarian celebrations of our ecological embeddedness. As Bridgette noted, "At times it seems as if art and organic food are expensive luxuries reserved for fancy art museums and elite food markets. Art and good food are something everyone should be able to enjoy and feel empowered to make" (Ruffin, "Make Way," 18). Likewise, ecological citizenship is something that everyone should enjoy and feel empowered to shape.

It is in the spirit of greater synchronicity of ecological and national citizenship that I close with another opportunity to sit under a figurative "black tree." This tree symbolizes that ecological citizenship can be real-

ized and, even in the face of human systems that threaten it, passed on. Ahmos Zu-Bolton II, a key African American cultural worker in New Orleans, heralds the generational transfer of ecological embeddedness in his poem "The Family Tree." The poem's standoff between a grandmother and those who endanger her family's relationship with an "old oak tree" signifies the human desire for ecological belonging and the human systems that challenge that desire. The tree becomes a cocreator of human history because its branches allow children to "fly free" into their "grandma's bosom"; it is present when protest marches are planned; it functions as a burial ground (an "oaken tombstone"); it is the site of childhood milestones such as a first kiss; and it follows the evolution of African American identity ("from colored / to negro to black") (ya Salaam, *From a Bend*, 215, 216). The grandmother fights for the family's connection to the tree, saying it "was born during slavery times / but / it's free now / And as long as it's standing on / my land, it can shake its leaves / and spread its wings / anyway it damn well please." Rather than ending the poem with the conflict's outcome, Zu-Bolton concludes with the phrase "pass it on and on and on," suggesting that the struggle for ecological belonging may change but is ongoing (ya Salaam, *From a Bend*, 215, 220). This figurative tree and the rest of African American ecoliterary tradition urges us to act and shape human systems in alignment with our soundest ecological desires.

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NOTES

Introduction

1. Justin Barker "suffered no life-threatening injuries" and "walked out of a hospital after two hours of treatment for a concussion and an eye that was swollen shut. He attended a ring ceremony later that night" (Fears A03).

2. I use the term "nature" here to reflect attitudes that understand human beings as part of what Aldo Leopold calls a "biotic team" (241) rather than simply a human construction of the nonhuman world.

3. Kellert's conflation of national efforts and global conditions is regrettable, while there is no doubt that energizing cross-cultural conversation about the environment is crucial in a nation that arguably has the world's largest ecological footprint. That only African Americans are studied as a group that is ethnic is telling. Each of these demographic categories were apparently to be glossed; however, the tendency toward racializing African Americans stems from an ideology that construes difference as deviation from a European American norm. This tendency is ironically reflected in "Figure 10," which places European Americans at the mean for eight out of the nine environmental values Kellert defines. Only African Americans are critiqued as an ethnic group. Their experiences and those of other groups, namely the indigenous population in the United States, are not used as a guide in determining the values.

4. Eleanor Humes Haney's essay "Towards a White Feminist Ecological Ethic" is an excellent example of a European American scholar who racializes a white experience of the environment.

5. bell hooks offers yet another interpretation in *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*: she postulates that the "psychological impact of the 'great migration'" has led to African Americans' "estrangement from nature" (178–79).

6. Although Jones resigned from his position as special advisor on green jobs, innovation, and enterprise for President Barack Obama in September 2009 amid controversy over statements that he made about Republicans, he remains an advocate for green jobs. In addition, his book *The Green-Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* was a *New York Times* bestseller.

7. Maathai's books, *The Challenge for Africa*, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the*

Approach and Experience, and *Unbowed: A Memoir*, are themselves major contributors to ecoliterature that straddle many modes of writing: memoir, social commentary, and handbook. In addition, the documentary film *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* adds yet another layer of art and includes ancillary materials that encourage viewers to engage themselves in the world around them. Maathai's brand of ecoliterature mixes social activism with artistic vision. She also details the way in which Africans educated in colonial systems seek to reclaim the power of precolonial African ecological perspectives.

8. The publication *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, edited by Camille Dungy, radically improves accessibility to this canon.

9. Ian Frederick Finseth's *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770–1860* (2009) and Paul Outka's *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008) demonstrate the growing body of literature that includes examinations of race and African American authors in ecocritical study. *Black on Earth* is different in its exclusive focus on texts written by African Americans and the critical attention given to the influence of race on the expression of ecological burden and beauty in this literature.

10. Douglas Hales's *A Southern Family in White & Black: The Cuneys of Texas* details the lives of Cuney-Hare, her paternal grandfather (prominent planter, European American Philip Minor Cuney), and her father (Norris Wright Cuney, the first African American leader of the Republican Party in Texas).

11. Douglas Hales comments, "Cuney-Hare, who inherited a love of poetry from her father and may have written some herself, began to collect poems written about trees after moving to Boston. . . . Dedicated to her daughter, Vera, who died ten years earlier, and bound in an expensive wooden veneer binding, the book contains over 170 poems by various poets and short essays written by famed environmentalist John Muir" (113).

12. The perpetrators go to the jail where the man is being held and ferret him away under the false pretense that they are his friends, telling the jailer, "We are friends of him whom you hold within / And we fain would take him away" (Cuney-Hare, *Message of the Trees*, 184).

13. Wilderness continues to be a site of racialized terror as seen in the kidnapping and brutalization of Megan Williams by six white supremacists (three female, three male) in 2007. In a remote, natural setting in West Virginia, Williams was held for five days and suffered an onslaught of attacks, including being brutally beaten and raped repeatedly and being forced to eat human and rat feces. Williams's horrific experience reinforces the contemporary relevance of histories of environmental othering that impact black women's experience of space, as written about in Evelyn C. White's essay "Black Women and the Wilderness" in *The Stories that Shape Us: Contemporary Women Write about the West.*

Chapter 1. "Toil and Soil"

1. Although the texts I examine do not lend themselves to a discussion of the subject, domestic work such as home management and dependent care, typically performed by women, are forms of work crucial in a discussion of ecological issues.

2. In addition to the book-length study by Finseth, examples of essay-length scholarship include: Christine Gerhardt's "Border Ecology: The Slave Narrative of Henry Bibb, Nature, and the Frontier Myth"; Barbara Cook's "Enclosed by Racist Politics: Space, Place, and Power Dynamics in the Slave Narrative of Harriet Jacobs and in Environmental Justice Activism"; Michael Bennett's "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery" and several chapters in Kimberly Smith's *African American Environmental Thought* which focuses on the "elite discourse" of authors living during and after enslavement such as Henry Bibb, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington.

3. Whitman, *Rape of Florida*, 9.

4. The collection of ex-slave narratives "began a year before the [FWP] came into being, in 1934, under the auspices of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and chiefly at the instigation of Lawrence D. Reddick, a Negro history professor at Kentucky State Industrial College" (Mangione 257).

5. However, the institution of slavery meant that the enslaved did not benefit monetarily from agricultural knowledge that they brought from Africa. Judith Carney (in her book *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*) and Klindienst (in *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*, the book that includes her study of contemporary Gullah gardening) give us specific examples of the way New World slavery depended on the indigenous African knowledge in their respective discussions of rice and indigo.

6. I am grateful to my aunt Helen Early for introducing me to this record of my great-great-granduncle.

7. Scholars differ in their interpretation of African American animal tales as relevant for ecocriticism. Mart Stewart suggests they reveal that "African Americans saw themselves as part of a unified universe of all creatures. At the same time, these tales, especially the trickster tales, were depictions of social relations as African Americans believed they were inscribed in nature" ("Slavery" 13). Kimberly Smith calls the tales "notoriously ambiguous," concluding, "It's not clear what, if anything, the stories tell us about humans' relationship to the natural world" (23, 22). Instead she argues that "slaves' cultural context made available different belief systems (magical, Christian, scientific, etc.), allowing the individual to take up whichever one seemed appropriate in a specific context" (23). Both scholars

have valid points; indeed, the tales could have been employed to represent a belief system that affirmed African Americans as ecological beings.

8. This is the first work published in the American South by an African American author.

9. Henry Louis Gates Jr. also notes, "Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were 'reasonable,' and hence 'men,' if–and only if–they demonstrated mastery of 'the arts and sciences,' the eighteenth century's formula for writing. So, while the Enlightenment is characterized by its foundation on man's ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been 'discovering' since the Renaissance" (Gates 51).

10. Given the policed spaces of enslavement and the criminalization of black "freedom" within the United States, perhaps it is no surprise that African American environmentalism has developed differently than that of European Americans, many of whom have enjoyed the presumption that their presence on U.S. land is essential to the nation's success.

11. Carolyn Merchant, "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative" (132).

12. Whitman's other themes about nonhuman nature include it being a prime location for romantic relationship (especially for interracial couples who face rejection in human society) and it giving a sense of self and community pride.

13. "The Freedman's Triumphant Song" appeared along with a shorter poem that was a "tribute to Civil War heroes" titled "The Veteran" in a pamphlet with the title *World's Fair Poem* (Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, 126).

Chapter 2. York, Harriet, and George

1. Founder of TransAfrica, Robinson details his decision to "quit America" in his book, titled *Quitting America: The Departure of a Black Man from His Native Land.*

2. Jesse J. Holland's *Black Men Built the Capitol: Discovering African-American History in and around Washington, D.C.* goes a long way in filling this void in American history.

3. York's final years and death are a mystery. No documents have been found to support William Clark's claim in an interview with Washington Irving that he "freed" York (Betts 166). Clark's recollection that York died of cholera in Tennessee exists alongside the story that York lived out his last years with the Crow Indians in the Rocky Mountains. Although the poem privileges the latter story, "Birth Day" gives voice to both versions of the events (Walker, *Buffalo Dance*, 70).

4. Editor of *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature*, Jonathan Brennan notes that, "There has clearly been a vast array of African-Native American identities and communities" which call for a "regional approach" of the subject; however, "After the start of the European colonization of Africa and the Americas, contacts between Africans and Native Americans increased considerably" (3–17).

5. One example of how York's contributions have been obscured by history even in efforts to acknowledge that he was a part of the expedition can be seen in the lecture "The Medical Aspects of the Lewis and Clark Expedition." In this "Medical Center Hour" lecture at the University of Virginia in 1994, Ronald V. Loge, MD, FACP, takes ten seconds to show a drawing of York and say the following: "This is a picture of York, who was William Clark's servant and a valuable member on this trip." Loge obscures York's enslavement by calling him a "servant" and makes no mention that part of his "value" on the trip included his knowledge of botanical medicines.

6. William Ed Grimé's *Ethno-Botany of the Black Americans* (1979) is a classic compilation of primary-source citations that detail New World botanical practices of people of African descent.

7. Jean M. Humez's *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (2003), Catherine Clinton's *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (2004), Kate Clifford Larson's *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (2004), and Milton C. Sernett's *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (2007) are the studies geared to an academic audience. Recent novels include *Home, Miss Moses: A Novel in the Time of Harriet Tubman* (2006, by Eric M. Anderson) and *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life* (2007, Beverly Lowry).

8. Tubman has been a mainstay of children's and young adult literature. Acclaimed African American author Ann Petry took up the subject of Tubman in a 1955 novel that detailed a tender moment in which Tubman relies on her ecological knowledge to cope with stress. Petry describes Tubman's connection with the natural world as a motivating factor in her completion of the difficult task of hand-sewing a quilt in celebration of her marriage to her first husband, John Tubman. The comforting recollections of "Jerusalem flower," "motherwort," "water lily," "leaves," and "pine trees" help her to pay homage to one of the few tender and humanizing relationships a slave could have. Petry explains, "As the quilt pattern developed, she thought it was as beautiful as the wild flowers that grew in the woods and along the edge of the roads" (79–80). This excerpt also attests to the enslaved's ability to see their own humanity and forge a connection with nature outside the destructive lens of slavery. Petry even comments on the ecological skill of Tubman's father, saying, "[Harriet] knew moments of pride when the overseer consulted Ben, her father, about the weather. Ben could tell if it was going to rain,

when the first frost would come, tell whether there was going to be a long stretch of clear sunny days. Everyone on the plantation admired this skill of Ben's. Even the master, Edward Brodas" (22). Catherine Clinton suggests that Tubman's life story has been "confined to the storybook world" outside "serious historical examinations" (xi). At the same time, Tubman's solid presence in children's and young adult literature exposes younger generations to this American champion and has cultivated an older audience for the scholarly studies that have emerged at the beginning of the 21st century.

9. John Campbell's "'My Constant Companion': Slaves and Their Dogs in the Antebellum South" describes a "world teeming with dogs" that fulfilled the needs of masters and slaves. He writes, "Having these animals benefited slaves in three broad ways. With dogs, they were better able: to challenge and partially overcome the ever-present dehumanizing nature and consequences of slavery; to protect themselves from white people and other dangerous creatures; and to augment their meager subsistence allowance, thereby improving the material conditions of their lives" (56). At the same time Campbell goes on to suggest that dogs "also helped offset the sharp loneliness and social deracination" that came with the constant familial and communal upheaval experienced from the practice of selling the enslaved.

10. Her past few projects may be best described as historical poetry with a wide disciplinary scope. In addition to Carver she has taken up the lives of other African Americans: a slave named "Fortune" whose bones were held in the Mattatuck Museum in Connecticut; Emmet Till, whose lynching propelled the momentum of the civil rights movement; a group of African American female students who struggled to be educated in Connecticut; and Venture Smith, the first son of a Ghanaian king who was enslaved in America and who eventually bought his freedom and purchased liberation for others. *Carver, A Life in Poems* has received significant acclaim, earning the following awards: Newberry Honor, National Book Award Finalist, Boston Globe-Horn, Coretta Scott King Honor, Notable Books for a Global Society, and ALA Best Book for Young Adults. Her work reaches out to audiences of young and older adults as it does to those interested in the intersection of literature, history, visual art, and social change.

11. "Bedside Reading" (Nelson, *Carver*, 41) illustrates the love George Carver had for his mother in his gesture of keeping his mother's bill of sale in a Bible.

12. John S. Ferrell notes that one clear source of vernacular botanical knowledge came when, around age twelve, Carver boarded with Mariah and Andrew Watkins, an African American couple. "Mariah was a nurse and midwife with knowledge of medicinal plants. By passing on her herbal knowledge to Carver, Watkins may have sowed the seeds of her pupil's future fascination with the unrealized potential for plant-based products" (12).

13. Nelson is recognized as a "New Formalist" poet, artists who rely on can-

onized forms to create new work. She has commented on her penchant for established forms, saying, "The use of form seems to me to be more appropriate for poems about the historical past. . . . I've been experimenting with sonnets for some time, and enjoy working within that small tight space" (Gwynn 181). Nelson also identifies forms as buffers for writing about emotionally difficult topics, such as the lynching of Emmett Till. Of the crown of sonnets she creates for *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, she writes, "The strict form became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter, and a way to allow the Muse to determine what the poem would say. I wrote this poem with my heart in my mouth and tears in my eyes, breathless with anticipation and surprise" (Nelson, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*).

Chapter 3. Animal Nature

1. Dianne Glave details the circumstances: "In 1977, the Reichold Chemical Company located in Columbia, Mississippi, was accused of exposing two hundred cattle to dioxins and exploding Agent Orange, a defoliant herbicide and dioxin. In addition, the company allegedly poured chemicals downstream into Jingling Creek, past a recreational facility and high school frequented by African-Americans. Four floods also exposed toxins that Reichold had buried off-site at what is now a Superfund site" ("Black Environmental Liberation Theology" 195).

2. Richard Peterson, "Central African Voices on the Human-Environment Relationship" (172).

3. The publication of *The Green Bible* (New Revised Standard Version) in 2008 was a monumental development in religious and ecological discourse. The prefatory materials include clergy and scholars from Jewish and Christian communities that celebrate the pertinence of biblical scripture to ecological thought. The translation also features green-lettered biblical scriptures said to pertain to the following areas: "how God and Jesus interact with, care for, and are intimately involved with all of creation, how all the elements of creation–land, water, air, plants, animals, humans–are interdependent, how nature responds to God, [and] how we are called to care for creation" (*The Green Bible* I-16). After the biblical scriptures, the text concludes with "The Green Bible Trail Guide," which suggests topics for individual and communal reflection along with courses of action.

4. In addition, Walker has shared her ecological ideas in her frequent public speaking events and political activism. Butler's public persona was less directly political than Walker's, yet the sociopolitical critique inherent in her writing cannot be denied.

5. Walker's novels have received much critical attention, with several ecocritical readings of her novels in existence.

6. Some Christians believe that those who commit suicide are resigned to hell.

7. She describes the church in a tranquil manner, calling it "simple, serene, sweet" (*Anything* 10). The images she paints give the impression that the congregation existed "sustainably" with the church's natural surroundings, using their knowledge of the land to sustain themselves and the natural beauty around them. A break with this sustainable lifestyle occurs when the county "develops" the area to make way for tourism. Walker comments that the people who "whiz by in their pickup trucks" seem "so unconnected to the land they appear to hover above it, like ghosts" (*Anything* 10).

8. Butler's contention is reminiscent of the opinion of cell biologist Lewis Thomas (qtd. in Love 36).

Chapter 4. Bones and Water

1. The intermediary categories are "Natural History Essays," "Rambles," "Solitude and Back-Country Living," "Travel and Adventure," and "Farm Life" (278).

2. At the age of thirty-three, Dumas was shot and killed by a New York City Transit policeman under circumstances that are unclear. He was unarmed.

3. This historic collection includes a virtual roll call of stellar names in African American literature. Among the many critics and artists are Margaret Walker Alexander, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jayne Cortez, Stephen Henderson, Pinkie Gordon Lane, Haki R. Madhubuti, Toni Morrison, Larry P. Neal, Arnold Rampersad, Ishmael Reed, Clyde Taylor, Quincy Troupe, and John A. Williams. Critic Eugene B. Redmond served as editor of this collection and continues to promote Dumas's literature in the twenty-first century.

4. Several of Dumas's protagonists are adolescent boys coming of age in the South. This age of development is crucial in the formation of narratives of place that can shape adult perspectives. Although Dumas left his birthplace of Sweet Home, Arkansas, at the age of ten and died in New York City, the dominant presence of the American South in his work suggests its mythic role in his vision of African American culture.

5. Older examples include Kenneth Wiggins Porter's *The Negro on the American Frontier*, William Loren Katz's *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* and *The Black West*, and Ralph Ellison's title essay in *Going to the Territory*; current scholarship includes Quintard Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West* and Blake Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West.* Glasrud and Champion's *The African American West: A Century of Short Stories* compiles the work of fiction writers from Paul Laurence Dunbar and Pauline E. Hopkins to Ntozake Shange and Walter Mosley.

6. Sylvia Washington's concept of blacks as environmental "others" (*Packing Them In* 25) is similar, yet Austin's evocation of "deviance" and "miscreant" connote the severity of the consequences associated with these negative assumptions.

7. Everett mentions, "For *God's Country* I must have watched and read 150 Westerns so I could soak up the genre" (Birnbaum 10).

8. Writing an introduction to an Akashic Books edition of Thomas Jefferson's *The Jefferson Bible*, Everett describes Jefferson's role in creating racist myths at the core of exclusionary versions of "American" identity. He writes, "Jefferson's notions of racial difference shaped American racial attitudes and he helped this country justify racism by coughing up the word *scientific*" (Jefferson 30–31).

9. The narrator includes the language of "conquer" in his parallel between himself and a Thai prostitute. BB Trane explains that a moment of kinship sparked his love of the prostitute. He says, "It was the look in her young eyes when she misunderstood my request for directions to the restroom for solicitation of sexual service. . . . She looked *conquered* and I knew the feeling. . . . As painful as the feeling was, it was also freeing, as it revealed to me the one thing that both attacker and victim should feel, the emotion out of which, it might be argued, all other emotions grow, shame. . . . Not all truths are great" (*Grand Canyon, Inc.* 89–90).

10. Marco Williams's film *Banished: American Ethnic Cleansings* and James W. Loewen's *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* are superb broad examinations of the way racism motivates people to limit access to public and private spaces. Colin Fisher's "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot" provides a local history of the ways in which repeated and violent terrorism discouraged African American access to nonhuman nature, particularly public parks and beaches. He notes the ways in which the actions of both white thugs and government officials created an environment in which "blacks struggled for access to open space" (64).

11. The killing of Tad Johnson is reminiscent of the real slaying of Chicago Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton in 1969 by Chicago Police Department officers. Although Everett includes a disclaimer emphasizing the fictional nature of his novel, he also grounds his work in history. Following the disclaimer paragraph in his "Acknowledgements," he goes on to note sources such as *Indian Treaties 1778–1883* (by Charles Kappler) and *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (coauthors Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall) as a part of his creative process.

Chapter 5. "I Got the Blues" Epistemology

1. Song references come from both Eric Sackheim's *The Blues Line: A Collection of Blues Lyrics* and Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism.*

2. As can be read and heard in *Something about the Blues: An Unlikely Collection of Poetry* (2008)–a combination book and CD by California Poet Laureate Al Young–the blues also inspired "multicultural" artist-activists who gained acclaim during the same time period of the Black Arts Movement.

3. While blues music serves as a sonic influence as well, she and the Firespitters reflect the generational transformation of the blues. For instance, even when she performs blues songs/poems, the instrumentation is often based in jazz or other musical traditions; this heightens the epistemological influence of the blues rather than merely its sonic impact.

4. T. J. Anderson highlights the role of nature in this tradition: "What Cortez shares with [Aimé] Césaire and [Léon] Dumas is a poetics that originates from a distinctly African and African American realism in which the power and creation of nature plays an integral part in everyday existence" (120).

5. Cortez directed documentaries of both conferences: *Yari Yari Black Women Writers & the Future* (1999) and *Yari Yari Pamberi: Black Women Dissecting Globalization* (2007).

Conclusion

1. In focusing on how the experience of underprivileged forms of national citizenship frustrates ecological citizenship, I neither disparage the contributions of noncitizens to any nation nor discount the urgency for global consciousness and action. Clearly transnational thinking is important to solving ecological problems. At the same time, I evoke the nation as a central construct in ecological experience for this study because the United States and its fragile access to full citizenship has been a significant barrier for many African Americans. Everyone within a nation's borders, regardless of their citizenship status, is crucial to ecological progress.

2. Lolis Eric Elie introduced me to this apt term after a screening of his film in Chicago.

3. MacGregor's *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* provides a solid overview of "green political theories of democracy" in her chapter "The Problems and Possibilities of Ecological Citizenship." She advances the concept of feminist ecological citizenship to address what she describes as the shortcomings in ecofeminist discourse, which idealizes the "ethics of care," and green political discourse, which overlooks the way gender inequality impacts women's ability to participate as citizens.

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